TRAVELLER

GREAT RIFT ADVENTURE 1: ISLANDS IN THE RIFT

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE IN THE FAR FUTURE

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GREAT RIFT ADVENTURE 1: ISLANDS IN THE RIFT

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INTRODUCTION

In *Islands in the Rift,* the Travellers are sent to Amondiage in Old Islands subsector to pick up a starship. Their mission is to take it to Zuflucht for transfer into Imperial space 'behind the claw' in Deneb or the Trojan Reach. However, the task is not simple; the ship is not sitting on a berthing pad at Amondiage and is in fact on an entirely different world and not in a flyable condition.

Once the Travellers manage to reach the ship they can finally begin their voyage across the Islands subsectors. This, too, is not a simple matter. The Islands are prone to tension at the best of times and, at present, some worlds in the region are on the brink of war. The Travellers risk being mistaken for spies – not without cause, since their ship is an Imperial intelligence-gathering vessel. The Travellers will need to make a detour to collect a hidden stash of data before transit to Zuflucht, and there are those who want to get their hands on it first.

RUNNING THE ADVENTURE

Islands in the Rift begins on Amondiage in Old Islands subsector. The Travellers have just arrived after a long, long transit and may wish to look around or relax before embarking upon their mission. Once they go in search of the ship they are supposed to be picking up, one event will lead to another. However, the Travellers have considerable leeway to find their own path through the adventure. So long as they get the ship to Zuflucht without starting a major war, their patrons will be content.

Before the adventure begins the referee should ensure the Travellers are familiar with the briefing material in the next chapter. This outlines their task and some background information on the Islands subsectors. Of course, there is no guarantee all of this information is current or reliable. Indeed, the purpose of the mission is to retrieve a vessel whose data storage contains a wealth of up-to-date information on the Islands and their politics… yet this vessel and her crew met with disaster despite having access to better information than the Travellers have available. The referee should let the Travellers figure out for themselves that a lot of what they 'know' is vague, inaccurate or dangerously misleading.

REFEREE'S INFORMATION

The following information is for the use of the referee. Much of it will be available to the Travellers but not always in a reliable or easily digestible form. The referee must decide how biased, ill-informed or otherwise misleading any data source may be. As a general guideline, the more work a Traveller has to do to get a piece of information, the more solid it should be.

The Situation in the Islands

The Islands subsectors have been a powderkeg ever since well-meaning Imperials disseminated jump drive technology to all the major powers. The web of alliances in the region has generally prevented conflicts from escalating, as no power wants to be dragged into a catastrophic conflict over some historical dispute. However, the system is breaking down and some have begun to think they can actually win an interstellar war. Hand in hand with this realisation is the fear that someone else might believe likewise, leading to an increase in paranoia as states wonder who might be considering a pre-emptive first strike.

There was little history of conflict in the Islands subsectors before the introduction of the jump drive. The people of Serendip Belt enjoyed a period of ascendance as a result of reverse-engineering the drive from a mis-jumped Imperial warship but had made only limited gains when the technology was disseminated throughout the Islands. This was a time of great change.

Before the introduction of the jump drive, the idea of interstellar conflict was almost laughable. Perhaps someday a sublight warship might crawl into a neighbouring system to make an attack, and a small budget was allocated for defence against this remote possibility. Most spending went on planetside peacekeeping forces or craft capable of policing in-system traffic. A token laser or missile launcher sufficed for such purposes and planetary defences were little more potent.

In most cases, the first indication that the Serendips were building faster-than-light vessels was the arrival of a starship. This caused a great deal of alarm and hurried programmes were put into place to construct orbital forts and in-system warships. In the event, Serendip Belt did not attack any of her peers, though her small force of jump capable vessels were used to forcibly annex Gloire.

By the time jump drive technology was widely available, the Serendips possessed a modest sized fleet and had expanded their power enormously, by economic means and political pressure rather than military action; the great powers of the Islands ensured they were all but invulnerable to attack by any fleet that could be built at the time but could not compete with Serendip's new interstellar trade vessels.

When they obtained the jump drive, the other powers of the Islands had a lot of catching up to do. Early starship building programmes were hurried and prone to disaster, with makeshift vessels launched as quickly as they could be thrown together. A second wave of more reliable and capable ships followed, with the result that many first-generation vessels were retired and left to decay or scrapped for spares. Some of these ships, refurbished in a variety of inventive ways, were taken up by private operators. An explosion of small-scale interstellar commerce then ensued, most of it completely unregulated.

There was little large-scale colonisation, as the Islands had already been settled using sublight ships. However, the availability of faster-than-light travel meant that previously unviable locations could be colonised for resources and independent groups could find a new home. The years that followed saw escalating tensions during the 'scramble' as the greater powers sought to take control over new territories and prevent others from doing the same. The period is sometimes known as the Years of Little Wars due to the small-scale conflicts between groups determined to carve out a homeland or conquer a world. Some wars dragged the greater powers in, resulting in clashes both in space and on the ground. No general war ensued but many lives were lost and bad blood remains.

Another cause for ongoing resentment was the unrestricted use of special-operations and covert-action forces. An explosion at the orbital shipyards over New Colchis did little material damage but caused appalling casualties among an unprepared workforce when the yard depressurised during the launch ceremony for the jump-capable frigate *Watchful. Watchful* herself was involved in an incident with ships from Esperanza – suspected but not proven to be behind the attack – in which she blasted the crippled corvette *Numancia* into wreckage despite a clearly broadcast surrender.

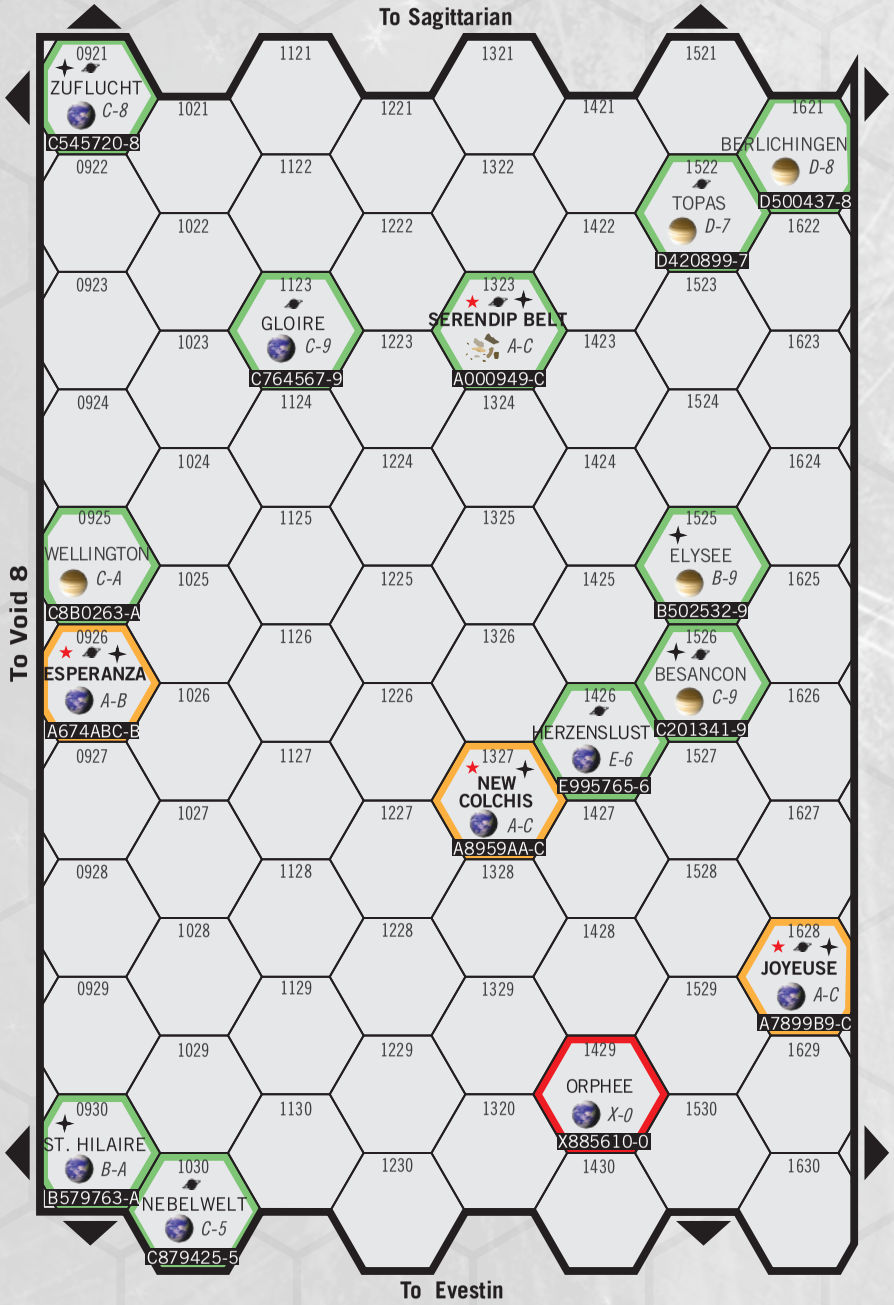
Incidents like this have resulted in mistrust and ill-feeling between the powers and hampered efforts to create an alliance. Nevertheless, the other powers finally curbed expansion and forced Serendip Belt to relinquish control over Topas, Elysee and Besancon. This was not without incident but encounters were limited to token groundside skirmishes and exchanges of fire between ships, causing little damage.

Ill-feeling between the powers also grew from failure to fulfil treaty obligations, leaving ships isolated and in danger, and several new deals were brokered at gunpoint after a world switched sides to gain a better bargaining position. Today, tensions continue to rise as the powers of the Islands attempt to expand their influence over neighbouring worlds, though it is not clear where the flashpoint – if there is one – will be.

Serendip Belt is apparently intent upon regaining its position of dominance and taking an increasingly aggressive posture both in negotiations and fleet deployments. At present, the Serendips are in alliance with Joyeuse and Sansterre, though cooperation is limited and may not last much longer. However, the situation is making New Colchis nervous as Joyeuse is heavily militarised and little short of hostile. A powerplay for worlds close to New Colchis seems likely, and to forestall it New Colchis is seeking allies elsewhere. Thus far, this effort has been rewarded only with vague statements of solidarity, as the other great powers tend to their own concerns or exploit the situation to their own advantage.

The massive changes caused by the introduction of the jump drive have demonstrated the impact a new technology can have, and all powers are seeking high-tech equipment or the secrets of making it. The Imperium is not receptive to overtures, especially given recent experiences in the Islands, but corporations and world governments may be willing to supply equipment that could tip the balance of power. At present, the single most important factor in preventing a war is the uncertainty about whether it could be won. A power that gains a significant advantage may be tempted to make use of it… and its enemies may feel they have no choice but to strike first to prevent it.

NEW ISLANDS SUBSECTOR

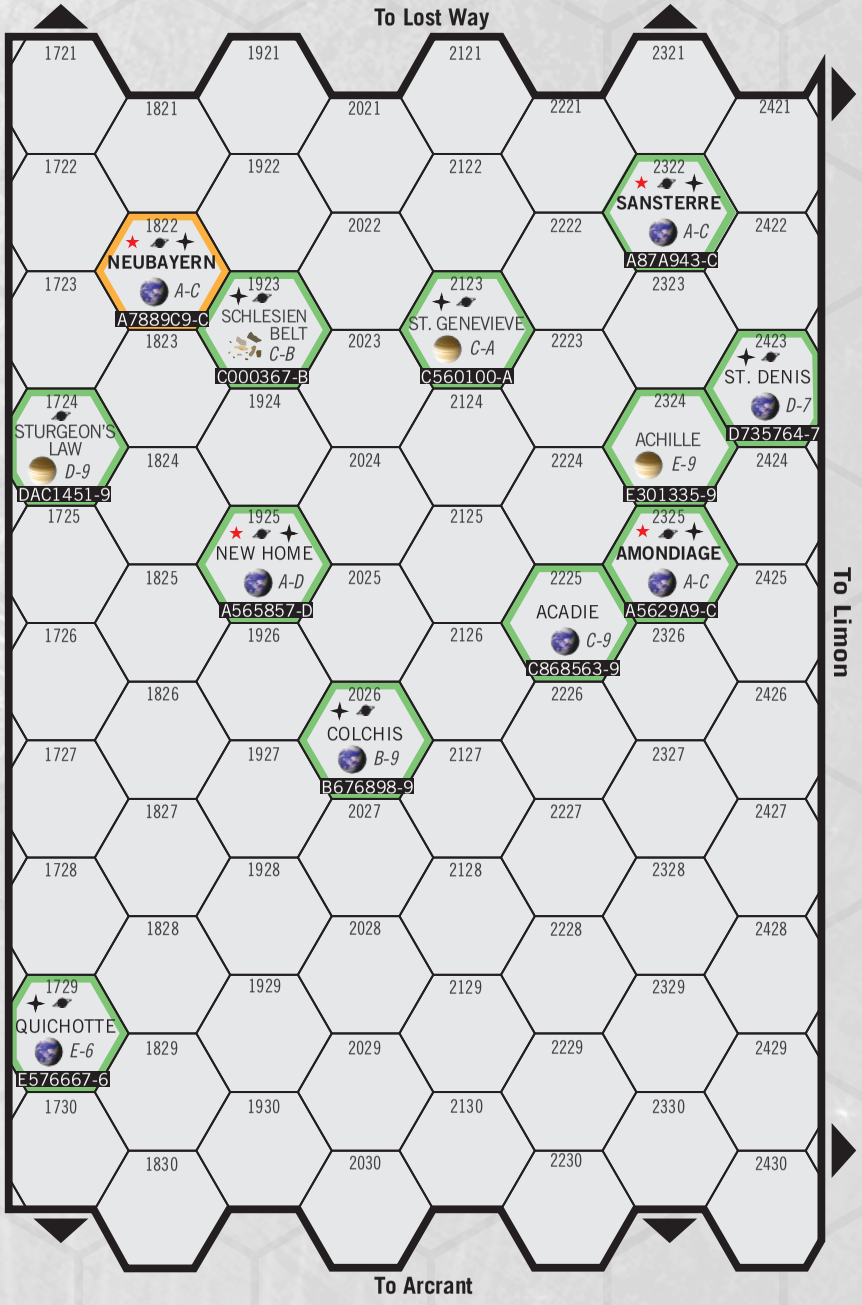


Gas Giant
B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level
Military Base/Garrisson
Other Naval Base

Secure System
Amber Zone
Red Zone

Planet (water present)
Planet (dry)

OLD ISLANDS SUBSECTOR



The Fate of Perfect Stranger

Perfect Stranger conducted a lengthy intelligence-gathering mission in the Islands subsectors, making circuits of the main trade routes and visiting most worlds in the region. Her data cores contain a wealth of information, much of it mundane but still useful in building up a picture of the Islands. Unfortunately, she ran afoul of her own success. Her crew stumbled upon evidence of a major deal between the government of Neubayern and an Imperial broker. Whilst not illegal, the contract was for jump drive components and weaponry, and would be of great interest to rivals and potential enemies. Assuming the crew were covert agents of a rival power, Neubayern's own counter-intelligence community took action.

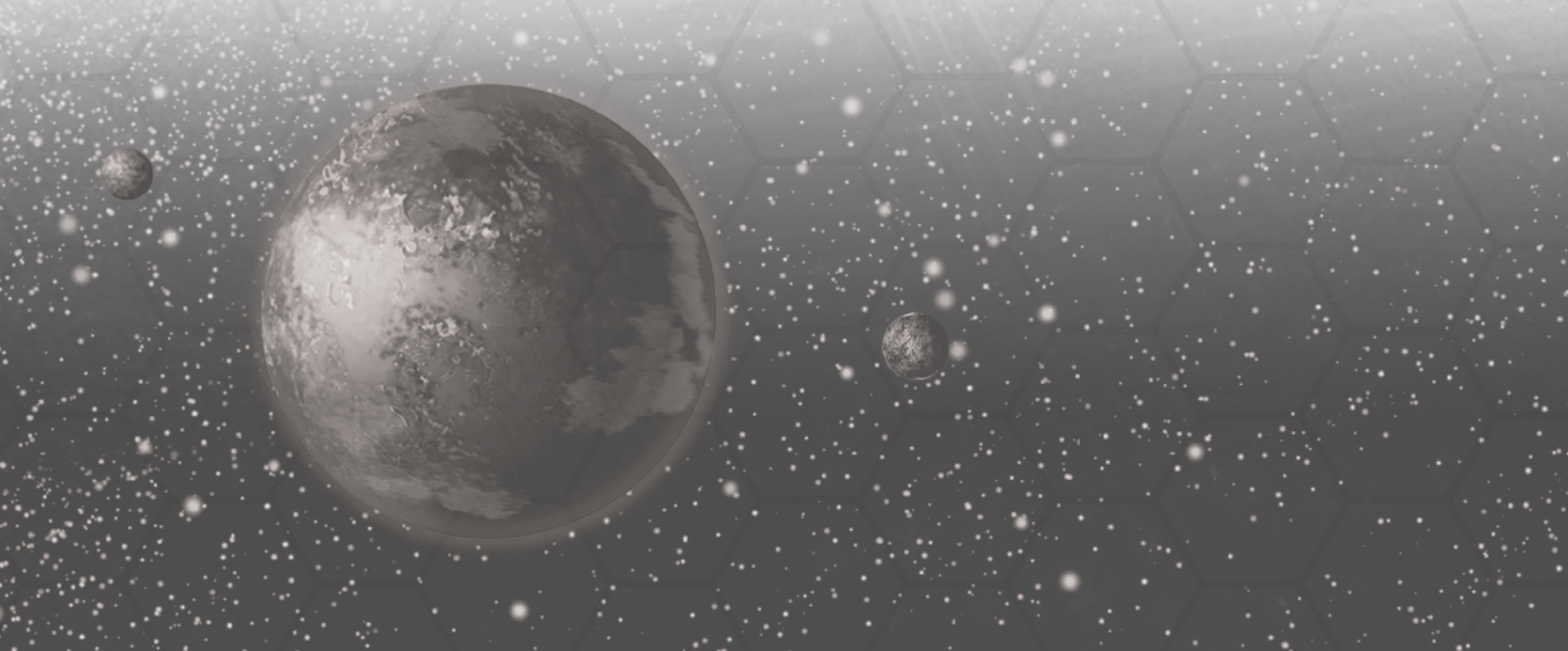
The crew of *Perfect Stranger* were lured into an ambush on Acadie and eliminated, though two managed to escape in their ship's launch. Badly injured, they crash-landed and were rescued by a merchant ship which the counter-intelligence operatives decided not to attack. Both survivors were placed in low berths and taken to Amondiage where, despite the best available medical assistance, they died. Their bodies were shipped home in accordance with their repatriation bond – which aroused some suspicion as the cost was enormous. Their personal effects, containing data recording equipment that could have been very useful to Imperial intelligence services, went missing.

The intelligence services have no real idea what happened to the ship or their other operatives. All they have are two bodies with what appear to be laser wounds and a missing ship believed to be on Amondiage. The Travellers are tasked with locating and retrieving the ship, and finding out what happened to her crew.

In fact, *Perfect Stranger* is on a landing pad at Acadie starport. She has been 'visited' and 'inspected' by several parties claiming to be officials from Amondiage, but who are actually intelligence operatives from Neubayern. They managed to gain access to the ship and know about her modifications, and have removed the data cores from its intelligence-analysis station. The Neubayerners settled for keeping the ship under observation in the hope that some other clue might present itself. This has been a long and boring undertaking which will finally bear fruit when the Travellers arrive.

As for the authorities at Acadie and Amondiage, they have no reason to suspect that *Perfect Stranger* is anything but a merchant ship whose crew encountered an unexpected hazard. Routine notification has been sent to the ship's port of registry and her listed owners and, under Amondiage's laws, if no-one comes to claim her within a year (only a few months remain to the deadline), she will become legitimate salvage. Her situation has slipped under the radar of the Amondiage administration, which has larger concerns than one abandoned merchant ship parked at a colonial starport.

Note: The unrest on Acadie is not entirely the work of Neubayern's intelligence services but they certainly have their fingers in the pie. Some weapons have been supplied to the rebels and intelligence operatives at the starport are in contact with another cell at the troubled mining town of Houillon, who are helping ferment rebellion and providing discreet advice to the ringleaders. The elimination of *Perfect Stranger's* crew was a mistake; they had not uncovered Neubayern activities on Acadie or the large arms deal that was sneaked through the world's starport but, having acted, they believe they must now cover their tracks by dealing with the Travellers. There is nothing personal about any of this but the stakes are high and a bunch of foreigners are distinctly expendable.



C H A P T E R - O N E

TRAVELLERS' BRIEFING

The following information is for the use of the Travellers and should be available to them before and as the adventure takes place, as the referee sees fit.

THE ISLANDS SUBSECTORS

The Islands subsectors were colonised around the time the Third Imperium was founded by sublight colony ships in transit for many centuries. Most colonists spent the entire trip in cryogenic suspension, with some awake at any given time to deal with contingencies. One result of this long time spent in stasis is that the culture of the Islands is essentially two thousand years closer to that of Old Earth at the beginning of the Interstellar Wars than Imperial-standard culture. The Islanders also missed out on hundreds of years of Vilani and other cultural influences.

There are several powers within the Islands, most of which have a culture that can be traced back to a nation or region on Old Earth. The major powers are either first or second-generation colonies. The first three systems settled by the colony ships got a head start but the worlds they went to next have also developed into powerful states. Later colonisation, conducted with vessels built at first-generation worlds, resulted in smaller settlement programmes that remained colonial possessions.

Until recently, the Islanders did not have jump drive technology, colonising the worlds of their cluster using sublight ships. This represents a very different mindset to that of the Imperium – as they say: 'Imperials think a century is a long time, Islanders think a parsec is a long way'. The situation changed when an Imperial vessel accidentally misjumped into the Islands and some of the locals gained the secret of jump travel. To redress the imbalance of power this caused, well-meaning Imperial scouts disseminated the jump drive to all major cultures in the Islands. This did not have the intended effect of restoring stability; quite the opposite.

Despite common origins and a shared heritage – or perhaps because of it – the powers of the Islands mistrust one another deeply. Alliances are possible and can endure, but peace is always fragile and tensions run high. It would not take much to trigger a highly destructive war between two powers and such a conflict could spread to engulf the whole region.

THE MISSION

To many citizens of the Imperium, it matters little if a distant region destroys itself in warfare. However, the Islands Cluster is important because it is one of the main crossing points of the Great Rift. Troubled times in the Islands could result in communications delays at a critical juncture, something the Imperium would prefer to avoid. So, the merchant ship *Perfect Stranger* was sent into the Islands on an intelligence-gathering mission.

Ostensibly just a trader, *Perfect Stranger* was crewed by Imperial Navy and Scout Service personnel with a couple of representatives of the major merchant lines and an intelligence expert. The mission was to observe the Islands from the inside, as it were. *Perfect Stranger* would ply the trade lanes within the Islands, sending raw data and any conclusions back when she contacted an Imperial representative.

Something went wrong.

A few months ago, two members of the crew arrived back in Imperial space. They were dead, apparently because of wounds inflicted by a laser weapon. The bodies were shipped in cryogenic units aboard a vessel transiting from one side of the Great Rift to the other, and were accompanied by no personal effects. Documentation sent with the bodies simply names the crewmembers, and states they were shipped from Amondiage.

What happened to *Perfect Stranger* and her crew is unclear. Apparently, they got as far as Amondiage and met some mishap. The Travellers' mission is to retrieve the ship and bring it to the Imperial representative at Zuflucht, whereupon the intelligence data from its data cores will be sent on and the ship returned to service in the Islands on a new mission. Discovering the fate of the crew and rendering assistance is a secondary goal and must not be permitted to compromise the primary objective.

The Travellers will be given relevant paperwork to take possession of the ship by an Imperial representative – either a member of the Scout Service or a member of the Imperium's intelligence community. The Travellers' mission is to take possession of *Perfect Stranger* (her last known location is Amondiage Starport) and bring her to Zuflucht with her data storage intact. If necessary, the ship may be considered expendable so long as the data is delivered. Upon delivery, the Travellers will each receive payment of Cr250000. This is a success-only contract.

If they do not possess their own means of transport, the Travellers will be sent to Amondiage in low berths and have very little baggage space available (10kg).

Each of the Travellers will be given passcodes for the *Perfect Stranger* that can be uploaded into any computer, along with Cr10000 assigned for expenses, to be spent as they see fit. Each Traveller also has a credit account of Cr10000 per month, arranged with the government of Amondiage (it may not be welcome in states hostile to that world), expected to be spent on necessities for the mission – this account is monitored and may be withdrawn if purchases that are clearly non-mission related are consistently made.

C H A P T E R - T W O

THE PERFECT STRANGER

Perfect Stranger started out as an ordinary Type R subsidised merchant (see page 184 of the *Traveller Core Rulebook* or page 138 of *High Guard*), capable of jump-1 and four weeks of operation using her internal fuel tankage. Essentially a starfaring removal van, the Type R is ubiquitous within Imperial space and many areas beyond. Its primary feature is the huge two deck high cargo area with fore, aft and side doors. This makes loading and unloading the cargo space quick and easy.

Designed to plod along mains and make endless circuits of clusters, the 'subbie' is a humble ship and not one that would be associated with interstellar intelligence gathering. This is precisely why *Perfect Stranger* was chosen.

Outwardly, *Perfect Stranger* looks like every other Type R in space. Her paint scheme is predominantly an unattractive dark brownish-red, with scrapes exposing bare hull metal. She has dings and dents all over the hull, notably around the cargo doors. and has clearly seen better days. However, appearances can be deceiving.

Perfect Stranger's modifications are mostly in the cargo area, reducing capacity by 188 tons but altering her capabilities enormously. Access to the cargo area is no longer possible by way of the aft doors, though a small personnel hatch has been added. This is not immediately apparent from the exterior, as the appearance of the original doors has been carefully retained.

The lower deck – which is two storeys high – has been converted mainly to carry fuel but some additional systems have been added.

THE SYSTEMS ROOM

The systems room contains a small auxiliary powerplant, a TL12 unit massing three tons and generating 45 Power. With her main and auxiliary units in use, *Perfect Stranger* has 180 power points available – sufficient to run all her systems, including the jump drive, with spare capacity for emergencies. There are also two control stations for pop-up triple turrets mounted on retrofitted hardpoints, concealed by the fake aft cargo door, and can be rapidly deployed for a surprise volley.

The arc of fire of these turrets is limited by their position but in a stern chase they may be sufficient to deter pursuit. Each pop-up turret houses three beam lasers, while two dual turrets each housing two more beam lasers are mounted openly towards the prow of the ship.

The systems room also contains a large hardened data bank and an intelligence work area consisting of two computer workstations, an advanced interactive holographic display, and holders for the inevitable cups of coffee and snacks. There is a small refreshment dispenser and quite a good coffee maker in this area.

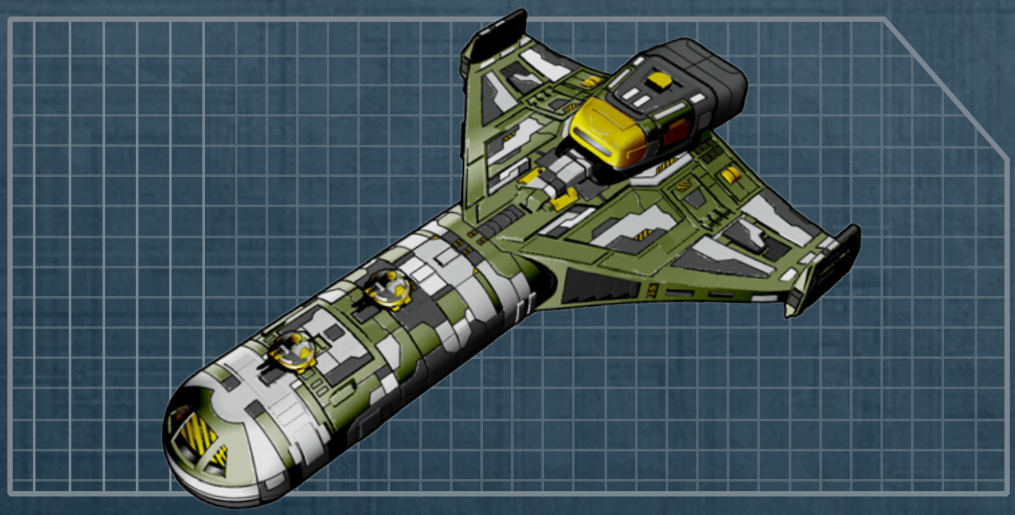
The systems room consumes 20 tons. 12 tons of this is the human-crewed area, with the other 8 tons allocated to power plant fuel; sufficient to run the auxiliary powerplant for two years and provide 26 weeks of endurance if both power plants run to capacity. This is far more than is ever likely to be needed but ships intended for deep-space transits must be prepared for eventualities and have a wide margin of safety.

THE FUEL/CARGO CONTAINERS

Most of the ship's cargo space is divided into four identical fuel/cargo containers, each capable of holding 40 tons of liquid hydrogen fuel. Rather than using collapsible fuel bladders or demountable tanks, *Perfect Stranger* has been refitted to switch between fuel or cargo in a few hours. This requires little more than flushing out the tanks to ensure no liquid hydrogen remains, then loading them up with cargo as needed. For more details of fuel/cargo containers, see page 21 of *The Great Rift Book 4: Deep Space Exploration Handbook*.

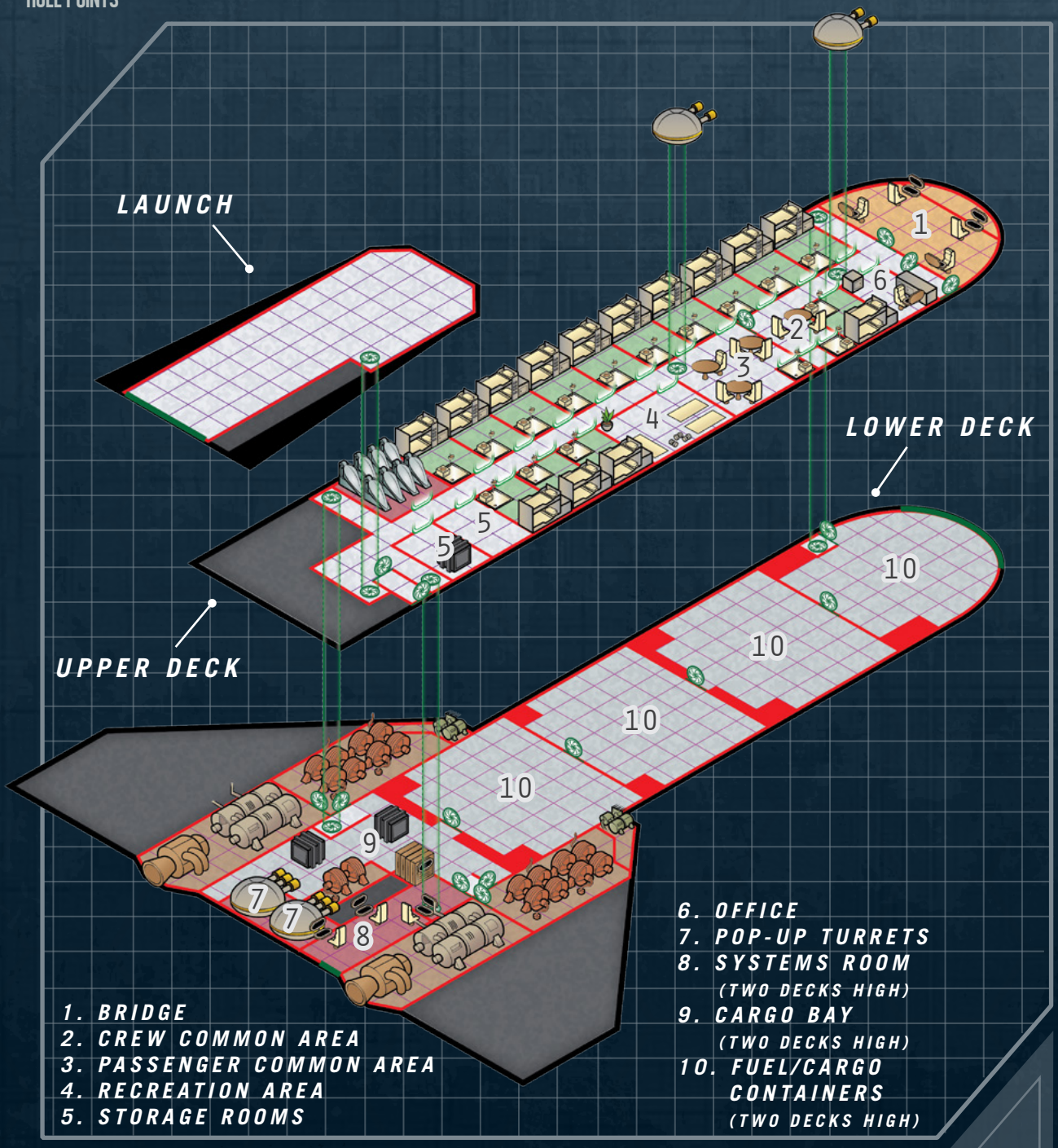
The other advantage to using containers of this type is that personnel access is retained. The modules include accessways, hatches and heavy-duty partitions that make them a part of the ship rather than a component to be added or removed. The downside is that each ton of capacity in a cargo/fuel module requires an additional 0.05 tons of equipment and costs Cr5000 per ton.

These fuel/cargo containers are useful when shipping bulk liquids but used primarily to extend the ship's range or endurance. The fore cargo doors still function and can be used to vent fuel in an emergency.



160

HULL POINTS



1. BRIDGE
2. CREW COMMON AREA
3. PASSENGER COMMON AREA
4. RECREATION AREA
5. STORAGE ROOMS

6. OFFICE
7. POP-UP TURRETS
8. SYSTEMS ROOM
   (TWO DECKS HIGH)
9. CARGO BAY
   (TWO DECKS HIGH)
10. FUEL/CARGO CONTAINERS
    (TWO DECKS HIGH)

Each container provides sufficient fuel for one jump-1. The ship cannot jump any further than this but, with all containers full, in addition to her internal tankage, she can cross a 5-parsec gap – albeit painfully slowly. When not transiting between mains or distant stars, the modules can be used to carry cargo.

Whilst *Perfect Stranger* is a far less efficient cargo carrier than an unmodified Type R on a 1-parsec run, she can go places most other ships cannot. This makes her useful for exploratory trade missions – as per her cover story – or low-budget exploration work. Access to engineering spaces is awkward due to the modifications; a narrow accessway runs aft from the systems room to the drive space iris valve at each side, requiring engineering personnel to detour through the systems room to access the opposite engine space. This is not normally a problem but could impede emergency operations.

THE UPPER DECK

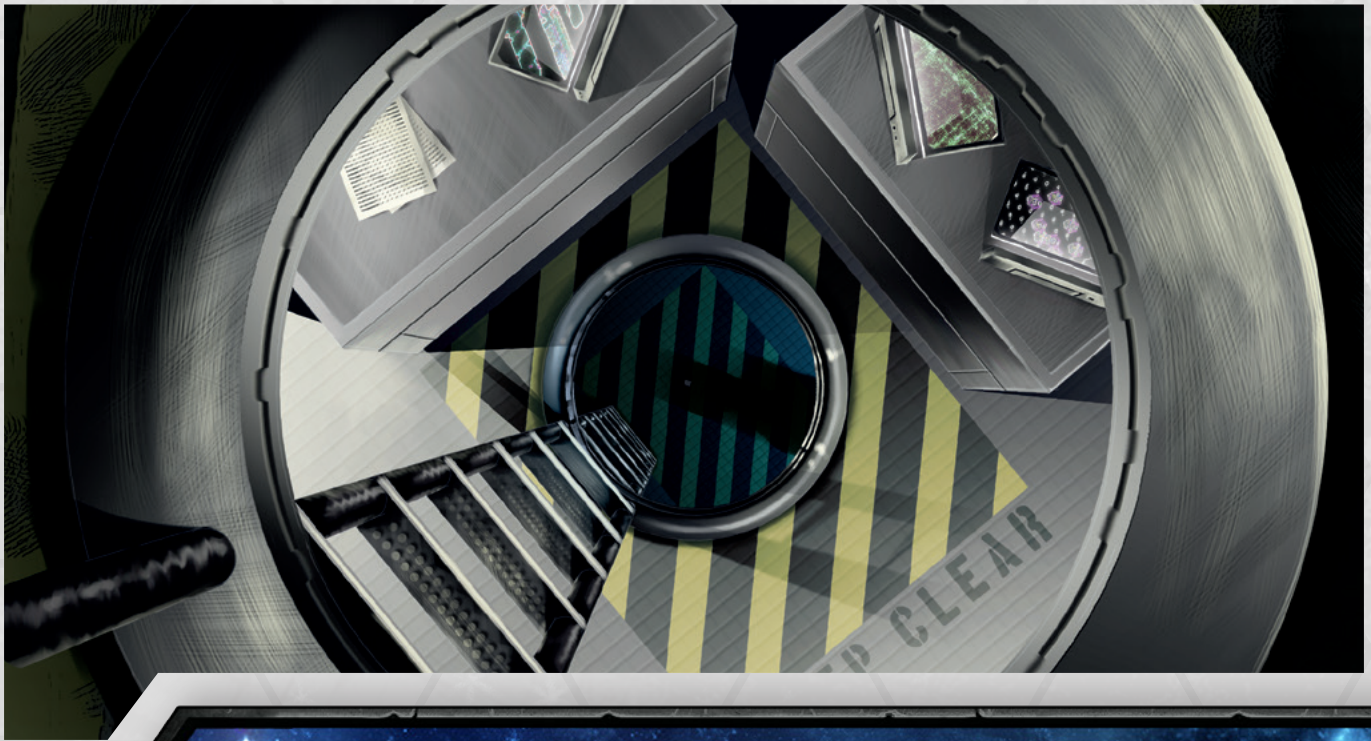
Fewer modifications have been made to the upper deck. *Perfect Stranger* remains entirely capable of carrying passengers or personnel. However, two of her staterooms have been converted to an additional recreation area to provide the crew more space during a long deep-space transit. Two more have been converted to storage areas but could be turned back into basic passenger cabins easily enough, while one other has been converted into a ship's office where reports are written and other mission-related matters dealt with in a suitable environment.

OPERATIONS

Perfect Stranger operates like any other small merchant ship most of the time. She can carry a modest number of passengers and retains a respectable cargo capacity when not making a long haul. Multi-jump transits require one week per parsec, with a few hours of drive calibration and navigational observations between. Crossing a wide area of deep space is at the same time boring and stressful for the crew, so at least a few days winding down portside, away from the ship, is a good idea for every crewmember. Crews that neglect recreation time will find their efficiency drops rapidly as fatigue increases, potentially leading to disastrous errors or crew disputes.

The visible armament carried by *Perfect Stranger* is reasonable for a small merchant ship operating in a frontier area and will not attract undue attention in the way an over-armed trader tends to, nor mark the vessel as easy prey. The presence of two additional military-grade laser turrets certainly would attract attention and, if discovered, the fact they are concealed might make authorities suspicious that *Perfect Stranger* is a pirate or raider.

There is no reason why passengers would access the lower deck during flight. Indeed, most operators of the Type R place a crew-only lockout on the access hatch. This is in effect aboard *Perfect Stranger;* all the Travellers are given codes for it. The accessway leads directly into the systems room, which can be seen from above. An observant passenger near the hatch might realise this is not a standard vessel – the area below would normally be full of cargo rather than consoles and machinery.



C H A P T E R - T H R E E

AMONDIAGE

One of the First Three (New Home, Neubayern and Amondiage; the first worlds settled by the ESA colony mission), Amondiage is a dry world with standard atmosphere. Its settlement pattern is typical; most of the population dwell in high-technology arcologies near abundant water sources, with smaller and less well-developed settlements in remote areas.

Amondiage's excellent starport is the point of arrival or departure in the Islands for most Imperial shipping headed across the rimward side of the Great Rift. Enough Imperial ships and personnel pass through that the locals – at least around the port region – are not surprised when someone from a species never seen before in the Islands steps off a ship. The Imperium is cosmopolitan and the people of Amondiage are familiar enough with its ways that misunderstandings are rare… provided newcomers are well-behaved.

The port is efficient, clean and well-run, with a bustle of ships and small craft. Most are from Amondiage's large trade fleet, whose personnel can be distinguished from the independents by smart uniforms and a clean-cut appearance. Indeed, there are uniforms everywhere – port workers, security personnel and private firms all have their own tastefully not-quite-overdone uniforms. The Travellers' first impression might well be that Amondiage is one giant propaganda exercise, which is not far from the truth.

Amondiage is a high-law dictatorship and one function of all the braid at the starport is to impress upon visitors that they should not step out of line. Wherever they have come from, the Travellers are on Amondiage now and Amondiage plays by its own rules.

Personnel at the port are polite and efficient, but intolerant of nonsense. There is also a faint air of 'better than you' about virtually everyone in a position of authority, however minor. No weapons or overt body armour are allowed through starport customs and there are stiff penalties for being caught with a weapon. However, secure storage for baggage and weaponry is free of charge, and handled in a polite and discreet manner.

The Travellers will be expected to answer simple questions when they arrive: name, business on Amondiage, occupation, and so forth. Anyone giving answers that are close to the truth or well-rehearsed will have no problems. Inventing a story off the cuff is more of a problem and requires an Average (8+) Persuade check. Outrageously bogus claims will attract attention, forcing the Traveller to deal with closer questioning and investigation of their identity documents.

Once they have passed the entry point, the Travellers have the run of the very impressive downport. A wide range of entertainment and accommodation facilities are available, along with shops and business premises. The clean and efficient atmosphere of the main concourse is no mere façade; it continues throughout the port and associated city.

INFORMATION AND RUMOURS AT AMONDIAGE

Public news broadcasts are full of 'brink-of-war-tension-rising' stories, revolving around aggressive posturing by Serendip Belt and bold words of defiance from other powers, notably Neubayern and New Colchis. Astute Travellers will notice there is very little substance behind the outraged headlines screaming about intolerable provocations. Ships have been 'aggressively deployed' to patrol stations they routinely pass through and 'escalation' has taken the form of diplomats giving incendiary interviews to their own press.

There is also a lot of propaganda showing Amondiage's powerful and well disciplined naval forces getting ready to repel hordes of invaders whilst earnestly hoping for peace, and loyal citizens getting behind what has been dubbed 'the peace effort'. Again, it is obvious to astute Travellers that this sort of broadcast is more about social control than journalism.

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT STRANGER

Perfect Stranger is not on Amondiage. The port's data system records no ship of that name currently berthed, nor is she at the highport. A general search for Imperial-registered Type R subsidised merchants may turn up a handful of possible candidates but they are all in service with a crew aboard. There are only about half a dozen Imperial-registered ships of this type in the Islands due to difficulties of getting them across the rift, though there are numerous ships of the same general design but of local manufacture. If *Perfect Stranger* is one of these ships, she will take some finding.

Records of previous ship movements are not publicly available, other than arrival and departure dates. These records can be searched by anyone and do indeed show *Perfect Stranger* passing through the port at Amondiage a couple of times. Her last visit was several months before her crew turned up in Imperial space and, given the transit times involved, that probably means whatever happened to *Perfect Stranger* occurred not long after her last visit to Amondiage.

The informal and rather patchy *Everyone's Guide to Ships of the Islands*, a privately maintained open-submission database, lists *Perfect Stranger* as an 'Imperial-registered garbage can with wings. Surly crew, bad food and shabby cabins. Seems to be working the Amondiage Cluster these days. One star, because you cannot give less than one star.'

The Travellers could gain more information from the port authority, which does keep records of shipping movements but does not simply hand it out to anyone. It may be possible to bribe someone, convince them the Travellers are Imperial officials, or gain access to records by hacking the database. However, the direct approach will work well enough here. The Travellers have papers that say they are empowered to take possession of *Perfect Stranger,* so have every right to ask the authorities where she is. Amondiage has powerful traditions of cooperation with lawful authority, so most officials will be happy to assist the Travellers so long as they are polite and have the right paperwork.

However they obtain the information, the Travellers will learn that *Perfect Stranger* did indeed work the local cluster before jumping to Acadie with a flight plan filed for Colchis, then New Home. There is no legal requirement to follow a plan after the first destination – trade opportunities and charters cause sudden deviations – but at least the Travellers know where *Perfect Stranger* went after Amondiage.

EVERYONE'S GUIDE

TO SHIPS OF THE ISLANDS

Perfect Stranger

1 Reviews | Middle/Basic/Low

Sam G

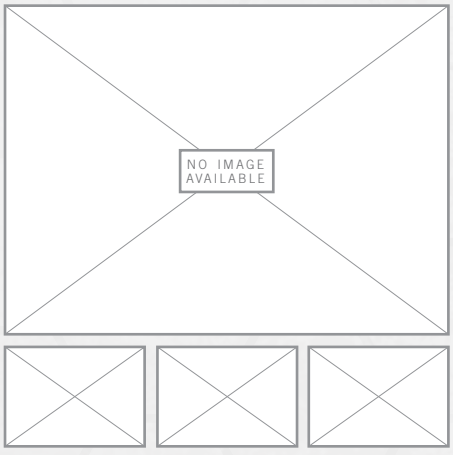
153 49

Middle

Deserves zero stars!

Imperial-registered garbage can with wings. Surly crew, bad food and shabby cabins. Seems to be working the Amondiage Cluster these days. One star, because you cannot give less than one star.

Was this helpful?



C H A P T E R - F O U R

ACADIE

Acadie is a colonial possession of Amondiage, with one major city and a very sparse population elsewhere on the world. The colony is kept deliberately dependent on Amondiage for industrial and technological goods, with consumer goods heavily subsidised by the central government. This amounts to bribery; the people of Acadie are well-off and comfortable when they toe the line and harshly corrected when they display too much disaffection.

As present, Acadie is going through one of its cycles of unrest and crackdowns, with large numbers of paramilitary law enforcers deployed to the world's one city to deal with labour disputes and protests. The mining complex at Houillon, about a hundred kilometres from the capital, is in a state of general strike threatening to spread to other outlying areas. Clashes between angry workers and security forces occur nightly.

The atmosphere in the capital is thus tense and suspicious when the Travellers arrive. They will be subjected to closer questioning than usual at the starport, though a plausible cover story and believable documentation will suffice to permit entry. Security officials will issue a warning about staying out of trouble which may sound like a threat but is actually sincere – Amondiage does not want offworlders coming to harm on its supposedly happy colony.

Acadie's normally quite liberal Law Level 3 is elevated to 6 at present, which may make it difficult to bring weaponry through the starport. Many weapon-carry laws are suspended and the authorities are suspicious of anyone who wants to be armed. The (perhaps reasonable) argument that the Travellers want to be able to protect themselves – precisely because of the elevated tensions – will get them nowhere. The authorities do not want guns on the streets whilst they restore order to Acadie's society.

FINDING THE PERFECT STRANGER II

Locating *Perfect Stranger* is very easy; she is parked on a holding pad where she has been for several months. Whilst not obvious amongst all the other ships, she can be looked up on the 'currently in port' database without any difficulty. The ship is listed as 'on hold', whatever that means.

The port authority will be delighted to have someone finally take possession of the ship. Those back on Amondiage hoping to claim her as salvage in a few months might be disappointed but the port director just wants the thing off his pad. Verification of paperwork will take a few hours, after which the Travellers will be given access to the ship. Of course, there is the small matter of berthing and port fees to be taken care of before *Perfect Stranger* can leave.

The ship has been sitting on a pad for months, supplied with water and power from external sources and, more importantly, it has been in the way of the port's operations. Berthing fees alone run into the thousands but the difficulties the ship's prolonged presence has caused increases the fee to Cr72000, payable before the vessel can take off. Leaving without paying this fee would be considered piracy; the vessel would be fired upon by port defences and, if it survived, hunted throughout the Islands.

The Travellers' expense account cannot be used to cover this amount – there is a limit on the monthly drawings and costs cannot be pooled. They will need to find some other way to pay the fee.

The port authority is aware that it is pushing the envelope by asking for so much – Cr25000 would be appropriate for fees and inconvenience. A certain amount of bargaining is thus possible. One approach is to cite interstellar shipping law, though this varies within the Islands and, of course, the Travellers may not be familiar with the details. A Difficult (10+) Advocate check (INT or EDU) can be used to knock Cr3Dx1000 off the asking fee, nit-picking some of the items being charged for and pointing out the illegality of certain charges under the circumstances. The Admin skill

can be used the same way, navigating the minefield of subsidies, tariffs and surcharges to arrive at a more sensible figure.

Whether or not these two approaches are tried, an Average (8+) Persuade check will halve the final asking price, provided it is accompanied by a good argument to the effect that the port gets its pad back into use once the pesky ship is on its way. Having negotiated, successfully or otherwise, all the Travellers need to do is come up with the money.

The cash may be on hand or the Travellers might come up with some clever scheme to get it. That might be anything from honest work to bank robbery or an investment scam to get locals to fund the ship's departure in return for a share of future profits. There is an alternative, however. *Perfect Stranger*, like many intelligence ships, carried a fair amount of cash and valuable materials (notably gold and platinum). The Travellers may not have been told about this but might infer there are contingency funds aboard the vessel. They can have access as soon as their paperwork clears; taking off is not permitted but there will be preflight checks and perhaps maintenance to carry out after such a long time standing idle.

Going aboard as soon as possible will not be suspicious; indeed, a crew who did not spend a couple of days testing systems before taking off would arouse more interest than one that chose to proceed with caution.

BOARDING PERFECT STRANGER

The most obvious thing about *Perfect Stranger* is that her launch is missing; the port authority has records of it being granted clearance to depart for the mining settlement at Houillon some months ago. It did not return and a subsequent investigation showed it had crashed – officially due to pilot error – during the return flight. The report glosses over the details of a gunfight at Houillon for the usual reason; the Amondiage administration that owns Acadie does not like information about unrest and other troubles to become public and even more so when it involves offworlders.

The wreck of the launch was bought by a salvage company out of Amondiage and dismantled in situ. No bodies were recovered from the wreck, though two survivors were reportedly rescued and placed in cryogenic stasis to Amondiage. No other records exist but the remainder of the crew are presumed lost in the crash. Trying to find details of the incident at Houillon simply turns up a report of a 'firearms-related incident' that day, which is vague to the point of uselessness.

The Travellers' codes are readily accepted and the vessel opens her doors for them. Inside, many rooms look as if the crew just popped out for a coffee. Personal effects stand on shelves in the crew cabins; clothes hang in closets. Other chambers are less pleasant; the galley is a giant mass of mould where the remains of a meal has festered for months. At first glance, the ship needs nothing more than a cleanup and good set of preflight checks. Closer inspection shows this is not so.

The ship's electronics are mostly intact and security seems to be in place – it does not appear that anyone has penetrated the electronic security on her critical systems, though there is evidence that the flight logs have been downloaded if anyone thinks to look for it. More seriously, some control systems simply do not work. Inspection reveals that control pathways have been interrupted at various points. 'Interrupted' means either severing of control pathways or removal of components. *Perfect Stranger* has been deliberately disabled.

The Travellers might leap to the conclusion that this was done by her crew to prevent theft. This is not the case. The 'officials' who boarded the ship did a good job of ensuring she could not take off in a hurry.

Finding all the breaks and repairing them or swapping spare components will take some time – hours or even days – for Travellers with engineering skills. Some of the missing components will have to be sourced, though they are common enough to be on sale in the port. The disabling of *Perfect Stranger* was not intended to be permanent, merely to slow down retrieval and gain time for a response.

A search of the ship will reveal two other missing items. The ship's safe has been lasered open and whatever was inside – probably contingency funds – has been removed. The data cores storing the intelligence gathered during her long cruise are also gone. It is unlikely that anyone in the Islands could decrypt the data – at least, not quickly – but someone has taken it. The Travellers' mission is to bring that data to Zuflucht. The ship is secondary but, for now, all they have is the ship.

Note: The data cores were shipped to an intelligence-analysis facility on Neubayern some months ago. They are beyond the Travellers' reach.

SECRETS AND STASHES

The 'officials from Amondiage' did not find all the ship's secrets. There are two items of import hidden aboard the vessel. Both are likely to be necessary to the play of the adventure, so the referee needs to ensure they are found. However, it is far better if the Travellers are proactive and rewarded with success rather than spoon-fed the next plot element. The referee should thus allow them to carry out their own plans before informing them they have found what they need.

The first item is a stash of Imperial credit plaques totalling Cr100000, concealed in a machinery space. This may have been put aside by a paranoid intelligence operative in case the money in the safe was lost or perhaps someone was lining his own nest. Whatever the reason, the Travellers now have sufficient funds to pay off their berthing fees, if they lacked them before, and buy the spares they need. The stash might be stumbled upon whilst looking for breaks in the control pathways or conducting a detailed inspection of the vessel's critical components.

There is also an important piece of information in the ship's data banks. The navigational systems are still in place and contain a very mundane set of logs detailing an exploratory trade mission around the Islands subsectors. The logs have been accessed, their top level of encryption easily broken, and someone has taken a download. However, since the Travellers have proper access codes, they will be able to see a couple of hidden files; one of those is designated 'Drop Point Hotel'.

Drop Point Hotel turns out to be close to or at the starport on Herzenslust. Reading the files will lead the Travellers to the conclusion that a backup of the ship's intelligence logs was dropped there. It may not be complete, of course, but a partial recovery should be enough to make the mission a success. There is no indication of where the main data core was removed to at this point.

PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE

The Travellers need to transfer their gear to *Perfect Stranger*, pay off their berthing fees, buy fuel, supplies and spares, and fix the damaged control pathways. They may also wish to engage in some trade. Their cargo hold is currently completely empty; cargo was delivered when *Perfect Stranger* arrived at Acadie and nothing was taken on by the crew before they met their end.

Preparations for departure will take a few days, during which time at least some of the Travellers may be coming and going around the port. The Travellers came under observation the moment they started asking about the ship, and very soon the intelligence team assigned to watch *Perfect Stranger* will begin to follow them.

Travellers who have worked in a security-sensitive environment in the past, such as ex-military personnel who served on counter-insurgency missions or intelligence operatives, diplomats, and others routinely aware of the possibility they are being watched, have a reasonable chance to spot the observers. Those who state they are being careful, perhaps due to the heightened tensions on the world, have a reduced chance. Travellers who blithely go about their business will simply not realise they are being observed.

To realise they are under observation requires a Difficult (10+) Recon or Streetwise check (INT, 1 day), DM+2 if the Traveller has worked in a security-sensitive environment.

Any alert Travellers going portside or into the city can check each day to see if they become aware of the operatives watching them. A positive Effect indicates an observer has been 'made'; an Effect of 6+ reveals the number and mode of operations of the observers.

There are five intelligence operatives at Acadie downport. One is a technical support expert who rarely leaves their safe house, whilst the other four take turns to watch the ship and follow the Travellers. The operatives do not routinely carry weapons when in the field, as this could cause entanglements with local law enforcement, though they might carry a concealed handgun or similar weapon if danger threatens.

The operatives have no real idea who the Travellers are and want to find out. Travellers aware they are under observation might engage in counter-intelligence work. It will not be hard to discover their personnel records (such as they are) at the starport have been accessed, so presumably the intelligence team knows at least a little about them.

SETTING A TRAP

If the Travellers are so inclined, they might try to draw their 'tail' into a trap and get answers the old-fashioned way. Much depends upon how they go about this; intelligence operators are professionally paranoid and have a habit of using counter-surveillance techniques as a matter of course. A clumsy ambush or grab attempt will be spotted and easily avoided; the Travellers will need to be a lot subtler if they wish to succeed.

One option is to lead the tail into an area they cannot easily get out of or induce him to rush, perhaps to avoid losing contact with a Traveller. Any snatch attempt will

be spotted as soon as it begins and the operative will make a vigorous attempt to escape. He will also trigger an emergency beacon which will cause comrades to arm themselves and come to the rescue. Operatives have no illusions about what happens to those who are snatched in this manner and will respond with a desperation and focus that may startle the Travellers.

If an operative is detained, they will stall for time. Even under extreme duress, if the Travellers are inclined to be barbaric, an operative will say little. They believe that once they have given up what they know, execution is likely. Thus, an interrogation will be a long process, with snippets of information extracted only with difficulty.

To successfully gain information from an intelligence operative, a Traveller may use Carouse, Deception, Diplomat, or Investigation. Each attempt takes 3Dx5 minutes, requiring a Difficult (10+) check. Success reveals one piece of information, with an Effect of 3+ indicating the Traveller has a good idea of how truthful the operative is being. Which information is revealed each time is at the referee's discretion and can be drawn from the following list:

1. The intelligence team are agents of the Amondiage government, watching a suspicious ship in case its owners return (totally false).
2. A response to the snatch is already underway. The Travellers are in big trouble and should surrender (basically true).
3. The operatives are not hostile to the Travellers, merely assigned to watch the ship and gather information (sort of true but their colleagues *did* massacre the previous crew).
4. The operatives are aware that *Perfect Stranger* is an intelligence ship and want to find out what she was doing, what her crew learned in their cruise, and so forth. (partially true).
5. The operatives do not know what happened to the previous crew (lie).
6. The operatives believe the previous crew were involved in shady dealings in the mining settlement of Houillon and think they may have fallen foul of skulduggery. They are interested in the situation as part of their general observation remit. (Partially true but misleading; the crew were deliberately eliminated by the Neubayern intelligence services to suppress what they had discovered.)

Note that captured operatives will not reveal they are from Neubayern, nor give details of what really happened to the crew of *Perfect Stranger* unless suborned, broken or 'turned'. This would require a lot of effort on the part of the Travellers and might take time they do not have. A telepath or someone skilled in chemical interrogation could short-cut the process but unless the Travellers have access to such resources they will not be able to get definite answers at this stage.

DIRECT ACTION

Whether the Travellers snatch an operative or not, as soon as they realise they have been 'made' the Neubayern intelligence team begins planning direct action. Their objective depends on whether any of their people have been snatched. They have access codes for *Perfect Stranger*, which the Travellers might not expect, and will try to covertly gain entry to set an ambush in the ship or rescue their comrades. They will settle for grabbing any of the Travellers if the opportunity arises.

The intelligence operatives will be armed for this endeavour and whilst they would rather capture Travellers for interrogation, they will shoot to kill if necessary. These are hard-nosed professionals who know the price of failure. They have no remorse or hesitation.

The ideal approach is to corner some or all the Travellers somewhere they cannot easily escape and surprise them at gunpoint; inside their own ship would be perfect, but perfection rarely happens in intelligence work. Once secured, the prisoners can be transferred to a safe house and later moved outside the city. A ship will eventually take them to Neubayern, drugged and in cryogenic suspension. At that point, they will disappear and never be heard of again.

Wounded or captured Travellers will be subjected to a preliminary and rather general interrogation. Smart Travellers may realise the intelligence operatives are fishing for information and have little idea what the Travellers know. The barrage of questions revolves around where the Travellers are from, who their backer is, and if they have access codes for 'all systems' on the ship. There is some emphasis on the 'all' since the operatives are tasked with finding a way to access the encrypted database within *Perfect Stranger's* memory cores.

How well the operatives' plan succeeds depends to some extent on the Travellers' level of caution and observational habits. They may be surprised in the ship or grabbed as they return from a shopping trip. Alert Travellers might realise something is amiss in time to escape – an Average (8+) Streetwise or Recon check will grant the Traveller a few seconds' warning. This could result in a chase through the arcology or across the starport, which the operatives would really prefer to avoid. However, they will take what they can get.

THE TRAVELLERS' RESPONSE

The Travellers will need to escape from the intelligence operatives if they are captured. Fortunately, the present security situation works in their favour. There is serious unrest in the city, often at random as some minor incident ignites in violence. The intelligence operatives (or the Travellers) may be mistaken for undercover police agents sent to quietly arrest troublemakers, causing a mob of angry citizens to burst into the middle of a confrontation, prisoner transfer, or interrogation and attempt to rescue whomever they think is the victim.

This could be tragic, hilarious or just plain confusing, as members of both sides are bundled away 'to safety' whilst others are subjected to a good ranting-at about civil rights, heavy-handed policing and the evils of government. The situation might well degenerate into a free-for-all, with nobody having any clear idea who is on what side… or if there are *any* sides.

The chaos can be an opportunity for escape or a frustrating loss of a prisoner, and may well leave the Travellers very confused. Locals who realise the Travellers are not in fact police or Amondiage intelligence may provide information amid a general barrage of frustration, annoyance and recounting of brave, foolhardy and tragic events during the intervention. Everyone is very excited and not particularly coherent, but the picture that gradually emerges is as follows:

The people of Acadie are usually content under rule from Amondiage but unrest occurs in cycles. The present situation is much worse than usual and the authorities' response has been unusually heavy-handed (which is saying something). There is open fighting between what are now being referred to as rebel groups and security forces in some settlements and riots here in the capital. Rumours are floating around that Imperial-made weapons have appeared among the rebels and the situation is escalating further.

Nobody really knows what is going on but it seems that someone has been stirring the pot. The settlement of Houillon is the apparent epicentre of the trouble; it is common knowledge (which does not mean it is true) that weaponry was delivered there about a year ago by an unknown group and more recently a bunch of merchants from 'that ship that's been there ever since' were murdered in the city. There are some fascinating conspiracy theories about what happened but the general impression is that Imperials provided weapons, for whatever reason. Since these weapons are being used to fight the 'oppression' of Amondiage, the angry segment of the population generally approves.

In short, the locals have no real idea what has happened or why but are very angry at the authorities for the way the crackdown is being handled. It is not immediately obvious who the intelligence operatives are (or were) but it seems that they are connected to the deaths of the previous crew.

LEAVING ACADIE

The incident with the intelligence operatives will be noticed by the authorities, who will have questions for the Travellers. If they hang around too long, the Travellers' mission will be complicated or imperilled by official intervention and/or more operatives. Besides, they have a lead on Drop Point Hotel which needs to be checked out. It is probably in their best interests to get moving.

If the Travellers hang around, they will be questioned repeatedly by officials from Acadie's government and in a couple of weeks investigators from Amondiage will arrive. The authorities are unsure what the Travellers know or are involved in, and cautious in dealing with Imperial citizens. However, they will not give up and will make life difficult for the Travellers with repeated questions, inspections of the ship and fishing for evidence of wrongdoing. In the meantime, if enough of the Neubayern intelligence agents survived, they will make another attempt to snatch the Travellers and/or their ship. In short, Acadie will rapidly become an unhealthy place to be.

The Travellers need to reach Herzenslust and locate Drop Point Hotel. From the name, they might infer it is starport hotel but this would be incorrect. There are coordinates in the database but without going to the world, they are meaningless. Getting to Herzenslust might be quite an undertaking, requiring several deep-space jumps. However, *Perfect Stranger* is well equipped for such a task. The Travellers would do well to check the state of her supplies and inventory; several weeks in deep space is bad enough but if the food runs out the Travellers could starve before making planetfall.

C H A P T E R - F I V E

ACADIE TO HERZENSLUST

How the Travellers reach Herzenslust is up to them. They could meander all over the Islands subsectors for several years if they wanted but, since the intelligence services of Neubayern are looking for them and the identity of their ship has been circulated to Neubayern and some independent ships, life could get hazardous. The Travellers' interests will be better served by getting to Herzenslust and then out of the Islands.

Perfect Stranger is capable of five one-parsec jumps in a row, without refuelling. Her sensors are not up to the task of finding a deep-space comet or similar refuelling point but she can make a long transit between refuellings. This is hazardous, however, as well as being very stressful and tiring for the Travellers.

The safest route, in terms of fuel reserves and margins for error, would be to make several two-jump-1 transits to Colchis, New Home, Sturgeon's Law, and finally Elysee before reverting to normal operations in the Central Islands Region. This would allow enough extra fuel to recover from a badly plotted jump or, alternatively, the Travellers could take on cargo or freight, and maintain their cover as an innocent merchant ship.

SETBACKS AND BREAKDOWNS

Being cooped up in a starship for an extended period is not good for most people and the added stress of deep-space operations can cause a drop in efficiency eventually leading to a breakdown. Upon leaving Acadie, the referee should begin keeping track of each Traveller's Stress Index (SI). This begins at 0.

Each week spent in jump adds D3 to each Traveller's SI. An additional +1 is applied if the jump is to an empty map hex, i.e. a deep space jump.

Each Setback encountered by the Traveller adds +1 to SI and requires a Stress check (see below).

Stress Index is reduced by downtime, such as spending a few days planetside hitting bars and seeing the sights. Each three full days of R&R enjoyed by the Traveller reduces their SI by 1D. Particularly memorable experiences – such as visiting a famous landmark or swimming with friendly aquatic animals – will reduce SI by an additional 1D at the referee's discretion.

The Travellers may come up with clever ways to reduce SI during a long transit. Each measure judged by the referee to be useful allows a reduction of -1 to everyone's SI. Examples include the use of medication by the ship's doctor, a crew party, screening of a favourite movie turned into a special occasion, or some silly contest that distracts everyone from their surroundings.

Whenever the Traveller encounters a Setback, a Stress check is required. What constitutes a Setback is up to the referee; it might be nothing more than a rude starport clerk that causes a Traveller with a high SI to snap, though usually it will be a tense situation in which the Traveller has little control over what is happening. Being stuck in deep space unable to jump whilst the engineer fiddles with the drive would constitute a Setback.

A Stress check is an Easy (2+) END check. Success indicates no particular ill effects, though there may be some cussing. If a check is failed, the Traveller reacts in a bad-tempered and unhelpful manner, perhaps downing tools and refusing to work on the drive, or going to his cabin and sulking for several hours. The Traveller is out of action for the next 2D hours and thereafter suffers DM-1 on all skill checks until their SI is reduced to 0. Subsequent failures increase the DM by -1 each time, eventually making the Traveller a liability to himself and everyone else.

A Traveller who fails a Stress check with an Effect of -6 or more suffers a breakdown and is essentially useless until this is dealt with. He will refuse to work on any task linked to the breakdown and become withdrawn or even violent. The Travellers may find they are stuck in deep space until their impromptu psychotherapy sessions have calmed the engineer down. Tackling a breakdown can be done in various ways – camaraderie, leadership, good food, medication or improvised therapy set up by a Traveller with Medic checks are all possible options. The referee should not doom the Travellers to a slow death in deep space because the ship's astrogator was too stressed to plot a jump but can use the concept of stress-induced inefficiency to nudge the Travellers in the direction of planetside time and associated adventure opportunities.

DEEP SPACE JUMPS

Plotting a jump to a precise location in deep space is a difficult business. Even a small error can strand a ship with dry tanks and no way to reach a fuel source. However, in the case of *Perfect Stranger,* this is not necessary. She carries enough fuel to make another jump, so exactly where the midpoint emergence takes place is not too important – one region of empty interstellar space is much like another. However, the location needs to be known in order to plot the next jump and establishing coordinates in deep space is not simple.

Upon emergence, *Perfect Stranger's* engineering crew need to conduct standard drive checks and calibration. This requires an Average (8+) Engineer (j-drive) check (2D hours, INT). Failure indicates the drive is not ready, requiring another attempt. This is not a huge problem in most cases but being unable to jump is stressful under some circumstances and could constitute a Setback.

Whilst the engineering team are busy, the astrogator must fix the ship's position using known reference points, typically stars and radio sources. It is not a difficult process, requiring an Average (8+) Astrogation check (3D hours, INT) but is lengthy. Once complete, the next jump can be implemented.

It is very unlikely that *Perfect Stranger* will emerge from jump close to another ship or object but, if the referee wishes, such an encounter could occur. Finding a wreck in deep space would be an impossible-to-resist lure for most Travellers, though disconcerting to more rational people.

HEADING FOR HERZENSLUST

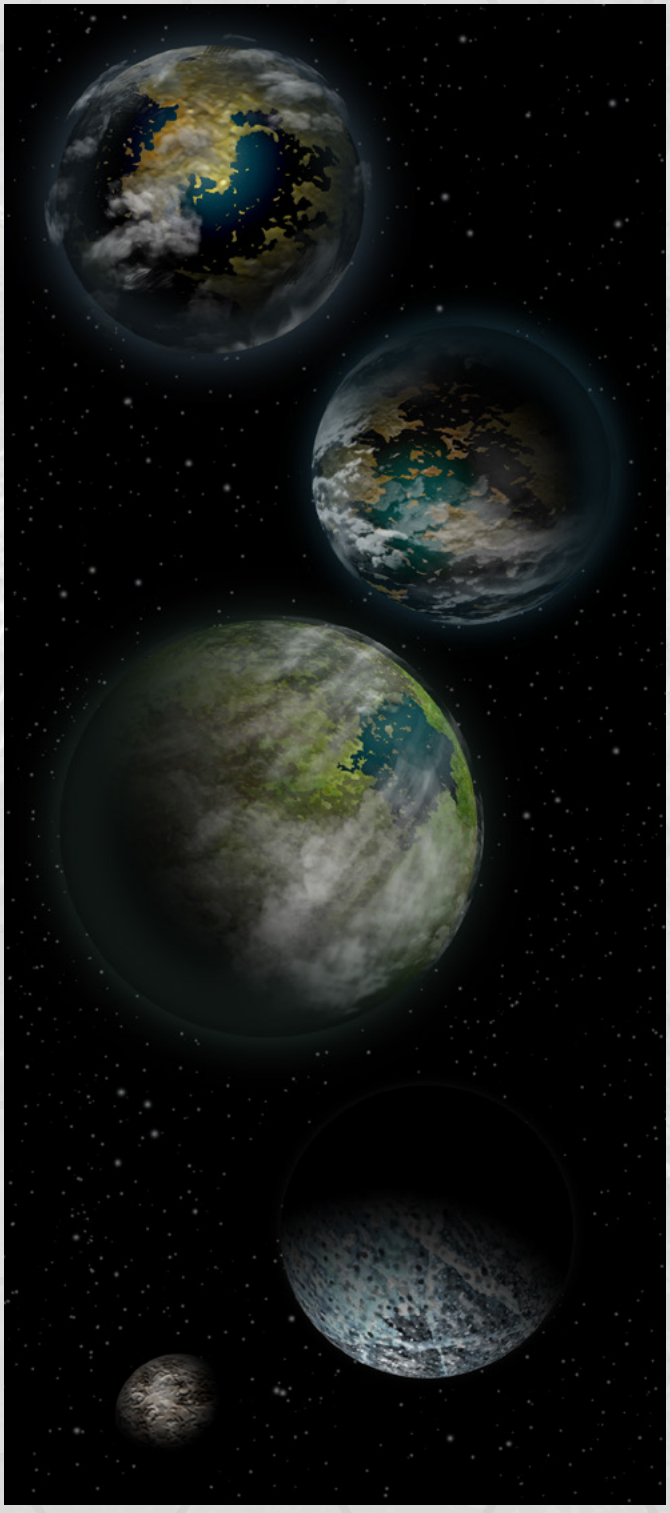
As already noted, there are several possible routes to Herzenslust. The Travellers are free to choose their own path, though some incidents will happen along the way. The referee should slot these into suitable location. The worlds of the Islands Cluster are detailed in the *Great Rift* box set, but brief descriptions are included here.

The intelligence services of Neubayern will be aware that *Perfect Stranger* has become active and are now searching for her. Their resources are limited but they have access to a great deal of money. A bounty has been put on the ship (capture or destroy) and her crew (capture alive, if possible) which makes attack by mercenaries quite likely. In addition, arrangements have been made (typically by very roundabout means) to impede and frustrate the progress of *Perfect Stranger.* In some cases, this even involves governments unfriendly to Neubayern; deals have been done through third parties, favours called in, and misinformation planted. This has not always worked as well as the Neubayerners might have hoped, but such is the nature of intelligence work.

C H A P T E R - S I X

TRAVELLING THE ISLANDS

These worlds are not directly connected with this adventure, but may prove interesting or profitable for the Travellers to voyage to.



COLCHIS

The Colchis system is very busy, with interplanetary vessels plying between several inhabited bodies orbiting both the primary star and its red dwarf companion. Colchis is an independent second-tier power in the Islands and not formally aligned with any other polity.

NEW HOME

New Home is one of the big players in Islands politics and has the highest Tech Level in either subsector. New Home is determinedly neutral in the current tense situation and doing well acting as a facilitator for both arms procurement and peaceful negotiations.

STURGEON'S LAW

Sturgeon's Law is a very nasty hellworld populated mainly by a moss that can metabolise flesh and metal. The starport is on a cleared island, from whence access to the world's only settlement is by submersible. The entire population dwells on the bed of the world's single sea.

ELYSEE

Although dominated for a time by Serendip Belt, Elysee is currently independent, though heavily influenced by New Colchis and New Home. It is a rockball world notable as the headquarters of the Islandbridge Trading Corporation, which has assets all over the Islands Cluster.

BESANCON

The world of Besancon is essentially a starport on a rockball. Theoretically independent, Besancon is at the mercy of whichever power is willing to grab it. Ill-feeling towards Serendip Belt is considerable, due to forcible annexation and occupation during Serendip Belt's period of ascendancy. The Battle of Besancon was a minor skirmish to the Serendips; to the people of Besancon it is both a symbol of defiant pride and a dark memory of a very bloody hour.

INCIDENTS

BUREAUCRATIC HARASSMENT

This incident is most likely to occur at a major world such as Colchis or New Home. *Perfect Stranger* is allowed to enter port and conduct her normal business but soon everything starts to take longer than expected. When the Travellers attempt to pay for the fuel they need, their expense account is declined as invalid. This might be put down to bad relations with Amondiage, since the account was arranged through that world's government but it soon becomes apparent that there is more to the situation than the politics of the Islands.

Within hours of landing, the Travellers are presented with a Grounding Order. The order is legitimate, issued by the port authority and requires *Perfect Stranger* to undergo a full spaceworthiness inspection. *Perfect Stranger* will not be permitted to take off until this is complete. The port authority has been tipped off that *Perfect Stranger* is carrying contraband and may be involved in piracy. The inspection is an attempt to discover if this is true and is being carried out by personnel acting in good faith on bad information.

Receiving this order would constitute a Setback for most Travellers.

Ignoring the Order

Ignoring the order would be very dangerous and may be completely impracticable. No fuel or supplies necessary to flight operations will be delivered to the ship until she has been cleared, docking clamps will not be released and flight clearance will certainly not be granted. Attempting to leave port without clearance will result in being fired upon by the port's defences and any armed craft on patrol nearby.

For a major installation like New Home Highport this is not survivable but even if the Travellers did something clever like going through a minor spaceport in the outsystem, they will face an immediate response followed by a general alert that makes an encounter with hostile warships more or less inevitable. In short, attempting a daring escape or fighting their way out will have serious consequences for the Travellers. Their interests are better served by using more subtle means.

Challenging the Order

The Travellers can get the order rescinded if they try hard enough, though that will take time. It will be necessary to go through the order and nit-pick it to death with a combination of legal and administrative expertise. The Travellers may be able to show it is invalid due to being based on an unsubstantiated allegation by an anonymous person or find loopholes that make it illegal. It may also be possible to obtain the cooperation of port officials in making the order go away by way of negotiation, schmoozing or simple bribery.

Travellers being who they are will no doubt come up with unexpected and probably convoluted ways to deal with this situation. It might be possible to bypass the whole problem by digging up dirt on the port director and coercing him to quash the order. That might lead to a whole mini-adventure in its own right. A more conventional approach will use a combination of elements, each of which takes 1D hours to complete. Each Traveller can work on only one of these tasks at a time.

To get the order rescinded it is necessary to obtain a total of Effect 10 from the relevant use of skills such as Advocate, Admin, Carouse, Deception, Persuade, and Streetwise. Each skill cannot be used twice in succession and efforts should be described in detail by the Travellers or, better, role-played. Unless the Travellers come up with a particularly dumb plan, checks will be Average (8+).

Note that the port authority will not volunteer the information that they are acting upon an anonymous tip-off about piracy and smuggling, and that they are searching for evidence. The Travellers may think they are just the victims of excessive bureaucracy, which might alter their approach.

Admin: Can be used to present strong, clear (and quite possibly bogus) evidence that *Perfect Stranger* has a clean spaceworthiness and maintenance record or to somehow demonstrate that the inspection is invalid or unnecessary.
Advocate: Can be used to challenge details of the order or the information it is based upon.
Carouse: Can be used to make friends who apply their influence.
Deception: Has all manner of applications, mostly linked to convincing the port authority that the Travellers are legitimate spacers and there is nothing suspicious about their ship.
Persuade: Might be used much like Deception, with (a version of) the truth as a weapon. Alternatively, it might be used to bribe officials into putting pressure on the port authority to rescind the order.
Streetwise: Can be used to find out information about people involved, perhaps for bribery or extortion purposes, or find someone who can help make the order go away.

Once the Travellers have obtained a total Effect of 10 using these or other relevant skills, the order will be rescinded and the Travellers given clearance to leave port.

Complying with the Order

If the Travellers let the inspection take place, they run some serious risks. The fuel/cargo modifications are innocuous but the extra powerplant will raise questions. As for the concealed aft turrets, those might be taken as proof that *Perfect Stranger* is a pirate or commerce raider and, if discovered, the Travellers will be detained indefinitely whilst the authorities try to find out which power they serve or if they are freelancing pirate scum.

The turrets will be discovered if the inspection takes place unhindered. There are only two options – derail the inspection so the turrets are not found or stall to buy time for the order to be rescinded, then indignantly order the inspection crew off the ship.

Derailing the inspection requires somehow inducing the inspectors to omit part of their job. This might be accomplished with simple bribery but the cost would be enormous – given the risk of discovery, the inspection team must be offered at least Cr50000, with DM+1 per Cr10000 above this. A Formidable (14+) Persuade check (SOC) is necessary for the bribe to be accepted by everyone concerned. Failure will land the Travellers in even greater difficulties.

Alternatively, distractions and complications might be arranged. An inspection team frustrated by jammed hatches and awkward equipment, liberally lubricated with apology-drinks from the embarrassed crew, might forget about part of the ship. A Very Difficult (12+) Deception check (SOC) is required and will be made easier by a task chain of actions used to set up the distraction. The referee might award a Boon for a well roleplayed distraction.

Stalling is an option. The inspection team will turn up after 2D x 30 minutes and want to begin work immediately. If the Travellers can produce suitable excuses about powerplant cooldown cycles or a need to move heavy equipment out of the way of the inspection, they can buy 2Dx 10 minutes per point of Effect on a Routine (6+) Persuade or Deception check. Each subsequent flimsy excuse is subject to DM-1 until the check is failed, at which point the inspection team boards *Perfect Stranger*.

The inspection team starts at the bridge and works aft through the upper deck, then descends to the lower deck by way of the aft hatch – straight into the aft space containing the concealed turrets. They will be found 2D x 5 minutes after the team enters this area. The spaceworthiness check is thorough; inspecting the upper deck will take two hours plus 4D x 10 minutes if the team are allowed to get on with it.

The Travellers may find ways to slow the inspectors down in the upper deck or persuade them that they just need to look over the cargo area before the aft part of the lower deck. Each attempt to slow down the inspection buys 2D more minutes per point of Effect on an Average (8+) Persuade or Deception check. The Travellers can continue throwing obstacles in the way until they fail a check, at which point the inspectors tire of them and no longer take notice.

On average, the turrets will be found 485 minutes after the grounding order is issued, assuming no Traveller interference. The Travellers thus have about eight hours (on average), plus whatever time they can gain from stalling, to get the order rescinded.

If the turrets are found, the Travellers have one chance to persuade the inspectors they are there for some worthy reason. A Formidable (14+) Persuade or Diplomat check is required; failure results in arrest and a lengthy inquiry, at the end of which *Perfect Stranger* is impounded on suspicion of being a raider, though the Travellers are simply deported. Their Imperial citizenship will protect them but their mission is a failure. If the referee wishes, the inquiry can be roleplayed and the Travellers given a chance to present some piece of epic flannel to get their ship back. If so, they will be seriously delayed but able to continue their mission.

CLOSED FOR BUSINESS

This incident is likely to take place at a less important system such as Sturgeon's Law or Elysee. The Neubayern intelligence services have persuaded the port authority to refuse landing permission to *Perfect Stranger*. She will be warned off and threatened with being fired upon if she tries to land. No reasons will be given. The port authority may have been led to believe she is a raider or crewed by criminals, or simply persuaded to refuse permission. This counts as a Setback if the crew are getting stressed

Perfect Stranger will need fuel, which cannot be bought and so must be skimmed from a gas giant. This requires a normal-space transit which should present no real problem, followed by a series of dives into the gas giant's atmosphere. Normally refuelling in this manner is not especially hazardous unless the ship suffers a malfunction or dives too deep but there is an additional hazard here; the gas giant is mined.

The mines are simple drones, each armed with a pair of missiles and basic sensor package. The Travellers are not the intended target; the mines were recently laid by a ship from Serendip Belt as part of a preparedness campaign in case current tensions escalated. The intent was to create a secure refuelling capability, with vessels engaged in skimming protected by the minefield. However, the lack of intent does not make the attack any less lethal.

The first warning the Travellers have is a sensor alert, indicating short-range guidance sensors are locked onto *Perfect Stranger*. Unless the weapons are already manned there is no chance to conduct point-defence against the first two-missile strike. Chances are the Travellers' ship will be hit and damaged whilst engaged in skimming operations. This is a bad time to be taking fire.

Once the Travellers are alerted, they can map the minefield by making a Very Difficult (12+) Electronics (sensors) check, at which point a route can be plotted out of the minefield. However, the Travellers still need to make 1D skimming runs to finish refuelling. They could transit to another fuel source and hope to be luckier there or finish refuelling whilst dodging mines.

Each skimming run risks further attacks. *Perfect Stranger* can stay out of reach of mines if they can be detected in time, requiring a Difficult (10+) Electronics (sensors) check. Failure indicates the ship is attacked by one missile per point of negative Effect, though evasion and point defence fire can now be conducted as normal. DM+2 applies to the Electronics check if the Travellers thought to conduct a full sensor sweep and map the minefield before resuming refuelling operations.

The Travellers might expect a warship to be in the vicinity but they are not attacked – the minefield is a passive measure deployed recently by a minelayer disguised as a small merchant ship. Explosions in the atmosphere of a distant gas giant might not be detected from the mainworld, though if the minefield were a defensive measure it would make sense for it to be monitored. The Travellers may thus be able to infer that the mines are not 'native' to the star system and that someone is trying to make space travel more hazardous for everyone else.

C H A P T E R - E I G H T

HERZENSLUST

Herzenslust is a habitable world, with a dense, tainted atmosphere and sufficient water to support a vibrant ecosphere. Surface gravity is high enough to be uncomfortable for newcomers but tolerable in the long term. After existing for many years at subsistence level, Herzenslust received an influx of colonists from New Colchis and, not surprisingly, became a colonial possession of that world.

The economic and industrial heart of Herzenslust is its capital city, which enjoys greater technological and social sophistication than the rest of the world. The capital has its own Class C starport but this is off-limits to all vessels other than those coming from New Colchis. Everyone else must make do with a rudimentary port over a hundred kilometres away.

Technology is a sustainable TL6, though the capital has a lot of imported equipment in use and is to some extent a city of New Colchis that happens to be located on Herzenslust. This sharp social divide causes surprisingly little friction as the general population is self-sufficient and for the most part just wants to get on with daily life.

Upon arriving at Herzenslust, the Travellers will rapidly become aware of a force of gunships defending the world, operating out of a space station built from a decommissioned freighter. As their transponder does not indicate New Colchis registry, the Travellers will be directed to the secondary port. No amount of argument will persuade the authorities that the Travellers should use the better port at the capital – they are outlanders and not permitted there; end of story.

As they approach the landing field (starport is too grand a title for it really) the Travellers get their first decent look at a city on Herzenslust. With a population of a few hundred thousand, the city has an outlying belt of towns and agricultural settlements, and several obvious industrial zones. These are not particularly large but industry is unusually concentrated. Transportation uses a mix of rail and road, with the occasional grav vehicle.

It seems at first that there is a huge number of starships grounded at the port but after a moment it becomes apparent that the landing field is on the other side of the city and the ships are not in commission. What the Travellers are seeing is a starships' graveyard; a place where obsolete or broken-down vessels are taken to be dismantled for spares. Processing the coordinates for Drop Point Hotel indicates it is located somewhere within the mass of derelict starships.

HERZENSLUST STARPORT

Herzenslust starport is little more than a large open space where the occasional ship lands, used by small traders for the most part; a far trader or subsidised merchant working the Central Islands Cluster is by no means an unusual sight. More than one or two ships in port at any one time is uncommon however, and large vessels more so; virtually all major traffic through Herzenslust is from New Colchis and uses the main port.

Landing clearance takes a while to obtain. The Travellers will get the distinct (and correct) impression that someone had to drop what he was doing and make his way to the control tower to respond to their messages. Traffic control is limited to 'stay out of main port airspace or you might get shot down. Really. Oh, and land wherever you like within the marked area. It's not like we're busy'.

By the time *Perfect Stranger* touches down, a reception committee is on its way aboard a rather elderly and disreputable-looking wheeled bus/truck combination. Ground crew personnel attach hoses and power feeds whilst a customs official looks over the ship's manifest. The port authority, such as it is, insists that new arrivals show documentation before leaving the immediate vicinity of their ship but this is the limit of personal border controls. Likewise, customs checks are little more than counting containers in the hold.

Attempts to wander into town festooned with guns will result in a warning about local laws. Carrying of any weapon is discouraged, though less-lethal items such as stunners are acceptable for personnel who might have need, such as merchant crews carrying a lot of cash. Shotguns and blades are considered entirely acceptable outside a settlement, but questionable at best in the city. The locals have no problem with the Travellers maintaining an armed guard on their ship but anyone carrying a weapon into town will be called upon to show they have a valid reason.

There is no main starport concourse, nor anything that comes close to one. The city just starts at the edge of the landing area, with no delineating fence or boundary. Indeed, local kids use the flat area for ball games and riding a variety of wheeled vehicles. There are derelict ground cars here and there along the fringe of the landing field and a couple of burned-out wrecks in the middle. It is clear the 'starport' is not highly regarded by locals.

From this less than salubrious environment, the Travellers cross into the city and within a few steps the situation changes considerably. The streets are reasonably clean and well-maintained, with local shops and businesses happy to take offworlder money. Those nearest the port get most of the off-world business and are used to strange accents and the occasional alien with strange dietary requirements. The locals are neither impressed nor disdainful of offworlders; they are simply another group of customers.

This complete lack of a startown vibe might be jarring to Travellers used to worlds where the port has a distinct identity of its own. Herzenslust simply does not have enough offworld money to make this worthwhile, though the situation is different at the capital with regular ships from New Colchis.

The Travellers might want to have a look around the town, perhaps unwinding after a long period cooped up in a starship. Entertainment opportunities are limited but it would not be hard to find an acceptable hotel, bar, restaurant or nightclub. After staring at the same six bulkheads for a week, a game of card bingo in a parochial little pub may seem like a glorious night out.

Sooner or later, however, the Travellers will want to find Drop Point Hotel. The coordinates they have place it somewhere in the starship graveyard but beyond that the Travellers will have to search. The graveyard is on the other side of town, easy to reach by rail transport or the local bus service.

THE STARSHIP GRAVEYARD

The starship graveyard turns out to be a fenced compound owned and operated by a company called WrekYard. There are also piles of trashed ground cars and even a few railway wagons in various stages of disrepair. WrekYard charges a Cr10 fee to enter the yard, mainly to deter gawkers and idiots who want to climb around the starships, and has a make-an-offer policy on components extracted from the wrecks. The less work the yard's personnel must do, the cheaper an item will be sold. Thus, if someone expects a heavy component to be removed, cleaned up and delivered to their ship, they will pay several times as much as a client who comes to the yard and does the work himself.

The yard staff know nothing about any data stash but may recall a party of offworlders who came to the yard several months ago looking for parts. They stripped a few bits out of an old Type R subsidised merchant that had been in the yard more or less forever, and asked a lot of questions about the origins of other vessels; mainly those that had suffered battle damage.

Many of the ships in the yard are first-generation Islands Cluster jump-capable vessels. The initial rush of construction once jump drive technology was disseminated throughout the cluster resulted in large numbers of not well-designed vessels taking to the stars. Most passed through a series of owners as better ships replaced them, and many were repeatedly upgraded, modified and generally fiddled-with. The yard has several working(ish) starships available at ridiculously low prices. Travellers might be sceptical about a vessel cobbled together with salvaged parts from unreliable first-generation jump-ships, and they would be right, though the yard does not deliberately sell deathtraps. Anyone buying a 200-ton trader for Cr300000 ought to realise they are getting what they pay for.

The Travellers could learn a lot about the evolution of starships and design philosophy in the Islands. Starship aficionados will have a field day here; those without an interest in the field will be bored and trip over things. The coordinates for Drop Point Hotel are vague, so it will be necessary to search through a few wrecks and get lost for a while before something stands out.

Amid the local designs is a half-dismantled Type R subsidised merchant. Judging from the weeds growing around access points, it has not been disturbed in months. The Travellers might figure out that if a stash had been left in the wreck, it would not be somewhere a salvage hunter would easily find it. A set of data cores would look valuable and so must be somewhere difficult to access, especially by those unfamiliar with the design of a Type R.

In the Islands, the chances of someone happening by who is intimately familiar with the internal workings of a subsidised merchant are far less than in the Imperium, making the subbie an ideal hiding place. The data cores are not large; they would fit in a small holdall, so the Travellers are looking for a part of the ship that is hard to access and might be completely overlooked by those not familiar with operating one. The auxiliary flow regulator chamber for the fuel scoops is notoriously difficult to get into for maintenance. Cussed out by generations of engineers, it would be an excellent hiding place.

The starboard side scoop is in pieces on the ground; nothing is hidden inside it except animal droppings and a long-abandoned nest, probably rats, if the Travellers care to speculate. The port side regulator is in place and can be accessed with the usual difficulty and swearing. Whichever of the Travellers gets to crawl inside has the added joy of finding another rat nest, complete with overpowering smell. There is, however, a heavily-nibbled and stinking holdall containing the backup data cores and a bundle of 20,000 Credit plaques.

However, just as the Traveller begins trying to extricate himself from the auxiliary flow regulator chamber, a complication occurs.

THUGS INBOUND

Although Zuflucht's intelligence services did not know about the stashed data cores, they were aware of the worlds visited by *Perfect Stranger* during her voyage. Once she was picked up by the Travellers, word went out to intelligence cells on many worlds – impede the new crew of *Perfect Stranger*, and capture them if possible.

The handful of intelligence personnel on Herzenslust are based in the capital and require time to put together a response to the Travellers' arrival. In addition, they are inclined to act cautiously and not draw attention to themselves, so they work through local assets, in this case local thugs happy to take money to rough someone up.

The thugs are not well motivated. They have been promised money to beat up and perhaps kidnap the Travellers, and are up for a rumble in the scrapyard, fighting hard so long as it is fun and not too painful; they can be deterred or driven off by determined resistance. They are not in any way organised; one thug will help another by opportunistically bashing his opponent from behind, but that is the limit of their tactical abilities.

How the Travellers deal with the approach of the thugs is up to them. They might not even notice until too late, taking the thugs for a bunch of scavengers or yard workers. If the Travellers realise what is going on they may have time to formulate a response. If not, they will have to react as events unfold.

To realise the group of people approaching have bad intentions requires an Average (8+) Streetwise check (1D seconds, INT).

If the Travellers are successful, they have sufficient time to make a run for it or for some of their number to conceal themselves. A quick look around for improvised weapons will yield something suitable on a successful Routine (6+) Recon check. If the Travellers are not successful, they will be jumped without warning by the thugs, who simply walk up and start throwing punches.

If the Travellers decide to confront the thugs as they approach, they may be able to negotiate or deter them from attacking. A Very Difficult (12+) Persuade check will indicate what it will cost to get the thugs to walk away; a bribe of Cr2000 plus Cr250 per negative Effect on the Persuade check – so Effect -4 indicates an additional Cr1000 is necessary.

Deterring the thugs requires a Very Difficult (12+) Persuade or Deception check, with DM +2if the Travellers have weaponry and DM+4 if the thugs are decisively outgunned (or believe they are). Failure will result in an immediate attack, with an attempt to grab weapons from their users.

The thugs are armed with knives and the odd improvised weapon but will use their fists unless the Travellers escalate the situation. Their intention is to have fun beating up offworlders and drag a few off to a vehicle waiting outside the yard. They have instructions to grab anything of interest the Travellers might have but are not specifically looking for data cores. Indeed, the intelligence personnel who sent the thugs do not know

these exist and are merely trying to snatch the Travellers in the hope they have access codes for the database already captured.

The number of thugs should be tailored to the Travellers' capabilities. Two or three more than there are Travellers will be a reasonable fight. The Travellers will have to fight or stall the thugs long enough for their colleague to get out of the flow regulator chamber, after which they might decide to flee or fight until the thugs are disabled or driven off. The latter is quite likely; any thug who has been wounded or pummelled to the point where he is almost out of END is likely to slope off, uttering dire threats of retribution.

If more than half the thugs are downed or driven off, the rest will withdraw, propping up their battered egos with a barrage of insults and threats, including some that may tip the Travellers off that something larger is going on. The thugs say 'you'll get yours soon enough' and 'you'll wish we'd dealt with you when *they* get here'. Who 'they' are could be beaten out of one of the thugs. All they know is that some guy with an offworld accent – Neubayerner or Zuflucht maybe – sometimes pays them to do dirty jobs. On this occasion, their instructions were to grab the Travellers or detain them until 'we' arrive. There was no explanation of who 'we' are but the thugs assumed it would be their patron.

Thus forewarned, the Travellers would be well advised to be on their way. The local police will turn up sooner or later, but the yard staff were thoroughly intimidated by the thugs and will not call for help until they are gone. In any case, the Travellers are unlikely to want entanglements with local law enforcement.

If the Travellers leave the yard by the front gate they will need to explain the holdall, which someone may recall they did not have upon entry. A suitable explanation or a 'gift' of a couple of hundred Credits will deflect questioning. Alternatively, the Travellers might just pay for the data cores. The yard staff will start asking for Cr5000 for what looks like advanced electronic parts but can be bargained down to Cr1000 without undue difficulty. Travellers who angrily demand to know why they yard staff did not warn them about the large number of thugs they just beat up will not be questioned about anything they are carrying. They would also be unlikely to protest if the Travellers 'borrow' one of their vehicles.

BACK TO THE STARPORT

If the Travellers are aware that whoever sent the thugs is on their way, they may feel the pressure of time. If not, they may be caught on the way back to the starport.

There are four intelligence operatives, all armed with weapons smuggled on-planet. They want the Travellers alive for the codes they are sure the Travellers must have, but are willing to shoot anyone who resists; they want to avoid collateral casualties but would prefer to kill or injure innocents than be captured.

The operatives will attempt to detain one or more of the Travellers at gunpoint and bundle them off to a waiting vehicle. If this fails or they cannot catch the Travellers, they will give chase in a ground car. The operatives are willing to shoot at or even ram a vehicle if they have a chance to stop it, but do not want the law involved. The pursuit is more likely to take the form of a cat-and-mouse chase in traffic, which could get complicated as both the Travellers and their pursuers slow down and drive politely past a traffic enforcement vehicle before accelerating and swerving between other vehicles once they are out of sight.

The intelligence team wants to put the Travellers' car off the road where they can snatch the Travellers or, failing that, catch them as they enter the starport. If they are on a train, the Travellers will need to cross the remaining distance to the port, possibly with the intelligence team in pursuit. A breakneck dash in a stolen car is one option; ramming the intelligence team off the road and escaping is another. A smart group of Travellers might get off the train early and conceal themselves among the locals, then sneak back to the ship.

If they lose the Travellers, the intelligence team will go to the port and watch the ship, requiring the Travellers to get past them. They have been given codes to access *Perfect Stranger,* which will work if the Travellers have not thought to change them. If this is the case, an ambush might be staged within the ship.

Note that the intelligence team does not have to be confronted head-on and defeated. They can be bypassed, outsmarted, out-driven or otherwise circumvented. Clever Travellers might find an entirely different way around them, such as tipping off the police about an armed party at large or enlisting the help of friendly locals to smuggle the Travellers past their enemies. In short, the intelligence team is a problem to be solved rather than a bunch of mooks to be shot. The solution might be direct and violent, but does not have to be.

Once the Travellers have the backup data cores, they can get on with their mission. The main data cores are beyond their reach but they can deliver *Perfect Stranger* and about half her findings to Zuflucht. That will constitute a success, if not a total one. A prompt departure might be in order, especially if the Travellers have attracted the interest of law enforcement.

C H A P T E R - N I N E

GLOIRE

Gloire is a habitable world, with a standard atmosphere and sufficient water to support a large agricultural base. Some areas of the planet are arid and there are significant regions of semi-desert that have never been fully explored. There simply was no need; the population is small and can easily be accommodated by the best land, though this situation is slowly changing as settlements are created away from the main hubs. Even these are not being set up on marginal land; there are plenty of fertile river valleys and empty plains to develop before attention turns to less inviting regions.

Gloire is a colonial possession of Serendip Belt, which exercises strict control over the main population centres. This is one reason for the slow drift outwards, though as soon as a town gains a large enough population to be economically significant, Serendip officials arrive to take over. This is presented positively and accompanied by investment and improvement of services but many inhabitants of Gloire would rather do without the Serendip sponsored health centre and school in favour of greater freedom.

Gloire is being developed into a breadbasket for Serendip Belt, providing agricultural goods that cannot be obtained in an asteroid belt. Large intensive factory-farms (known locally as 'government farms') surround small purpose-built communities run by Serendip personnel. These do little for the local economy; their produce goes straight offworld and generates no revenue as the farms are run by Serendip Belt. Most workers are robotic or technicians from Serendip, so there are no secondary benefits in terms of employment or salaries spent in Gloire's shops.

The population of Gloire is wearily resentful of their status but can do little about it. Life is not hard and living conditions are good. A modest amount of dissent is tolerated and ignored, whilst active resistance is harshly punished. Gloire is a showcase of colonial administration in that sense – there is no need to make the people happy so long as they are not miserable and the price of resistance is higher than they are willing to pay.

INCIDENT AT GLOIRE

The Travellers might reach Gloire by way of an epic five-jump transit from Herzenslust or might take the safer route of going back to Elysee and then through Serendip Belt. This part of the mission can be as eventful as the referee wishes but there is just one last obstacle on the way to Zuflucht.

If the Travellers choose to visit Gloire – they might want to stretch their legs after so many weeks in space – they find the locals pleasant enough and welcoming to Imperials. Resentment of Serendip occupation is obvious but the world is at peace. The Travellers – perhaps to their surprise – encounter no significant hazards on Gloire unless they do something stupid.

As they leave, however, the Travellers come under attack. This incident might be played out elsewhere, perhaps during a gas giant refuelling somewhere or whilst leaving another world if the Travellers take a very roundabout route.

As *Perfect Stranger* heads towards the jump point, her sensors pick up a vessel in high orbit, some kind of freighter; her transponder indicates she is the *Ershi*, an Imperial vessel out of Zuflucht. Her positioning is strange as she is not headed in or out but holding a high position to increase scanning range. The reason for this may become apparent when the Travellers detect her small craft.

Ershi has launched a pair of small craft which are accelerating gently towards a location close to *Perfect Stranger's* jump entry point. It might be coincidence but suspicious Travellers may want to take a closer look with an Average (8+) Electronics (sensors) check (INT, 3D minutes).

Success shows the craft are TL12 light fighters (see *High Guard*, page 94), used throughout the Imperium and widely exported beyond it. They are capable of a much higher acceleration but are pretending to be a slower kind of craft.

At the same time the Travellers scan the fighters, they receive a tight-beam signal from the merchant ship *Ershi*. It is curt and to the point:

'Imperial Naval Auxiliary Ershi *to* Perfect Stranger*. Stand down for boarding and crew replacement. Job well done. Time to go home.'*

The Travellers may smell a rat here and rightly so. There are no authentication codes accompanying the signal, which is voice-only, and *Ershi* launches another pair of fighters as she makes the signal. These, too, begin a leisurely acceleration.

As soon as it is apparent the Travellers have not fallen for the ruse, *Ershi* makes a broad band signal to the effect that she is a licensed mercenary vessel out of Esperanza and *Perfect Stranger* is a known pirate. Files containing 'proof' (all of it fabricated) are broadcast as *Ershi* claims sole right on capture and bounty. Her fighters begin to accelerate at top speed on an intercept vector, demanding immediate surrender.

Ershi is over 30,000km away and will remain there out of harm's way. Her fighters are launched in pairs (she carries 12) every three rounds and the leading pair is at Long Range (25,000km). If *Perfect Stranger* does not surrender she will be fired upon with the intent of crippling her and preventing escape.

It will take *Perfect Stranger* 2D+12 rounds to reach a safe jump distance. She can jump from where she is but risks misjumping, which would likely be fatal in the sparse Islands subsectors. She cannot outrun the fighters but may be able to fight them off. The attackers do not know about *Perfect Stranger's* concealed weapons so if the Travellers pick their moment, they have a powerful sucker-punch after which the fighters will try to close to dogfight range and stay out of the rear arc of fire.

No assistance is likely; *Perfect Stranger* and her crew must win this final fight for survival or last long enough to make a jump to safety.

C H A P T E R - T E N

ZUFLUCHT

Zuflucht has a thin, tainted atmosphere but is otherwise habitable. As the extreme spinward-coreward point of the Islands Cluster it would not normally be important in the affairs of the region but since the arrival of the Imperium in the Islands, Zuflucht has become the arrival/departure point for trans-rift traffic. As such, it is of some importance to the Imperium. The orbital component of the starport has been expanded to serve as a naval base.

In practice, the Imperial naval base at Zuflucht is little more than offices used by liaison and intelligence personnel plus a berthing area only occupied when an Imperial warship is in port. This is not often; the Imperial Navy maintains a presence in the Islands but its ships are constantly engaged in flag-showing cruises and spend little time in orbit around Zuflucht.

Be that as it may, the base at Zuflucht is Imperial territory. As the Travellers' ship emerges from jump space her transponder is recognised and a message is sent within seconds.

'Welcome home, Perfect Stranger*. Please proceed to docking bay as per traffic control instructions. Liaison staff will greet you.'*

A second message arrives soon after, from the Imperial destroyer escort *Ishsagi.* She is an old *Fer-de-Lance*-class vessel (see *High Guard*, page 153), small and long in the tooth; however within the Islands she is a potent symbol of Imperial might and a reassurance to Imperial citizens.

'Islands Patrol greets you, Imperial vessel.'

Zuflucht is not home, of course, but the Travellers have reached safety under the guns of the Imperial Navy. They have recovered the ship and most of her data. They may even have added to it along the way.

The Travellers' ship slides into a docking berth and a party of smartly-uniformed navy personnel attaches hoses and power feeds, and the ship's drive powers down as the docking clamps take hold. A naval lieutenant leads the reception committee… she even salutes! This is in part a show for the locals but to a band of Travellers so very far from home it could mean a lot.

Debriefing will take a few days. There are reports to make, statements to clarify and circumstances to explain. The ship's logs will need to be looked over to see what questions have to be answered. The Travellers are not in trouble; they are valued assets who have performed a service for the Imperium and treated as respected colleagues by the naval personnel at the base. They are billeted in the officers' quarters and have access to a very well stocked officers' club, with a bar tab paid by the intelligence services. This might all be a new and strange experience for some of the Travellers.

In due course, the reports are all completed. The Travelers are informed that payment will be made and transport homeward arranged… unless of course the Travellers are interested in remaining in the Islands? Imperial Naval Intelligence has many unanswered questions and would be happy to offer the Travelers a freelance contract to investigate the situation in the Islands further. They may even be able to find out who killed the original crew of *Perfect Stranger*…

But that is an adventure for another day.

C H A P T E R - E L E V E N

WEAPONRY

The following equipment appears in this adventure, but items may be found throughout Charted Space.

11/07954 LASER REVOLVER

Rather than a direct power feed from a battery pack or external source, this revolver used self-contained one-use cartridges which are expended after firing. The rapid generation of energy produces a lot of heat, but a cartridge weapon offers high-power laser capability in a small package. Weapons of this sort are favoured by some militaries, not least because their lack of recoil makes them suitable for use in space and obviates the need for a separate low-g arsenal.

The laser revolver is aimed at the shipboard security marketplace and is issued to Neubayern naval officers as a sidearm. It is also used as a security gun and can be found clipped to emergency-arms stations or carried by boarding parties. Its lack of sustained firepower is not considered a drawback in any of these roles.

Weapon	TL	Range	Damage	Kg	Cost	Magazine	Magazine Cost	Traits
Laser Revolver	12	50	3D+4	1	Cr1500	6	Cr30	Zero-G

11/0000X SPECIAL PROJECT LASER WEAPON

Built around the standard high-energy laser cartridge, this concealable handgun is used by intelligence operatives in the service of Neubayern. The weapon takes the form of a short rod that resembles nothing more than a bulky pen, complete with pocket clip. It is in no way a 'body pistol' however; the metallic construction and internal electronics will be detected by quite basic instruments, though the device might not be immediately recognised as a weapon.

Triggering the firing stud releases energy from the cartridge, delivering a powerful one-shot laser attack which has a very short range due to the difficulty of collimating a beam in such a small device. The cartridge can be replaced by unscrewing the rear of the weapon but this is not practical in combat. This weapon is not intended for that role; it is a last-ditch means of defence or assassination tool.

Weapon	TL	Range	Damage	Kg	Cost	Magazine	Magazine Cost	Traits
Special Project Laser Weapon	12	5	3D+2	-	Cr2500	1	Cr5	Zero-G

OPPOSITION

INTELLIGENCE OPERATIVES
AT ACADIE AND HERZENSLUST

STR	8	**INT**	9	**SKILLS**
DEX	9	**EDU**	6	Drive (wheeled) 1, Gun Combat (energy) 2, Melee (unarmed) 1, Persuade 1, Recon 1, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2
END	7	**SOC**	6	
WEAPONS				Dagger (1D+2) Auto Pistol (3D-3) Laser Revolver (3D+4) **OR** Special Project Laser Weapon (3D+2)

These operatives are professionals who work in the very hazardous world of intelligence and counter-intelligence operations. Not many years ago there was an almost good-natured aspect to their work – those who lost the game and were captured were protected by rules limiting how badly they could be treated, even 'off the books'.

Those days are gone and in the tense atmosphere of the Islands, intelligence work has become extremely dangerous. It is far more common to eliminate suspected foreign intelligence agents than return them amid diplomatic posturing and agencies have become paranoid. The Neubayern intelligence community is particularly prone to playing hardball, having lost numerous assets to savage counter-intelligence operations. Thus, the operatives at Acadie and Herzenslust have no compunction about killing anyone who gets in their way. They have orders to capture the Travellers alive if possible but, to their way of thinking, anyone who buys into the game can take their chances.

THUGS AT HERZENSLUST

STR	8	**INT**	5	**SKILLS**
DEX	6	**EDU**	3	Melee (unarmed) 1, Streetwise 1
END	8	**SOC**	4	
WEAPONS				Dagger (1D+2) Improvised Weapon (2D-2))

The thugs are a group of bored, disaffected young people who engage in petty crime and violence as much for fun as to make a living. They are not highly motivated and do not work as a team, but are still quite capable of delivering a beating or dragging off a Traveller. They were paid to attack the Travellers by their usual contact, who has used them for various other tasks but they never cared enough to ask who they were attacking or why.

The thugs all have knives but will not use them unless the fight escalates.